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The Black Giant; or, Dainty Lance in Jeopardy.

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AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "HURRICANE BILL," "MUSTANG SAM," "NIGHTHAWK KIT," "DAINTY LANCE," ETC., ETC.



LIKE AN ANGEL OF LIGHT A GIRL STOOD BESIDE THE NEGRO, ONE WHITE HAND RESTING UPON HIS MUSCLE-KNOTTED ARM AS SHE GAZED DOWN INTO THE SINK.

The Black Giant;

OR,
DAINTY LANCE IN JEOPARDY.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "BLACK JOHN," "HURRICANE BILL," "MUSTANG SAM," "DAINTY LANCE," "NIGHT-HAWK KIT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A REMARKABLE ENCOUNTER.

"THAT'S more a plenty whar that comes from, Lance," said Zephaniah Hardy, as a large snow-flake settled silently upon the outstretched hand of Lancelot Daintree. "We've had extry good luck so fur, but ef we ain't snowed up inside a week from this, you kn—"

That sentence was never finished.

While speaking the words recorded above, Hardy Zeph was walking along close behind Dainty Lance, for the trail which they were following was barely wide enough to admit the passage of one person at a time; a narrow path which wound along the side of a small, steep hill or ridge, at what would have been its base, only for a deep, rock-strewn and brush-entangled ravine or hollow which formed a continuation of the slope.

This "sink" was some forty feet in depth, but the snow which had drifted into it, filling the minor hollows and smoothing over the most forbidding features, made it seem much less, though neither of the young trappers was deceived by this fair, unsullied mask. They well knew what was hidden by the snow-mantle, for that narrow trail was frequently used by them in passing to and from their traps.

Yet, knowing all this, knowing that such a fall would be dangerous to limb, if not life, Hardy Zeph cut short his sentence, flung his arms around Dainty Lance, then flung both himself and comrade headlong from the trail, down the rugged slope.

Dainty Lance, taken wholly by surprise, and unable to help himself, uttered a cry that was cut short as the snow-crust yielded to their weight, and the dry feathery particles rose in a cloud around them as they rolled end over end among the bowlders and shrubbery at the bottom of the sink.

Dainty Lance was not the only one taken by surprise by this sudden action on the part of Hardy Zeph.

For nearly an hour four men had been lying in ambush on the hillside above the narrow trail, watching and waiting for the coming of the two young men whom they had strict orders to slay without mercy.

Crouching down in a narrow space between several bowlders, which space they had cleared from snow, the detailed assassins waited with a dogged patience until their intended victims were fairly in the trap; until the two trappers reached a point directly below them, not twenty yards away; then at a silent signal leveled their rifles, a brace at each target.

Powder was burned and the bullets sped. The assassins saw their game plunge headlong down the steep slope, and a united yell burst from their lips as they arose and broke cover—a yell that was fairly devilish in its ruthless exultation.

They believed their work was done, and done thoroughly; but they were soon undeceived.

So far from being slain, neither one of the youngsters had been touched by the lead, thanks to the swift and decided action of Hardy Zeph.

Through the slowly-falling snow-flakes he had caught a glimpse of the enemy as they partially arose from cover in order to make sure of their aim, and realizing the danger of himself and heart-brother in those leveled rifles, Hardy Zeph acted on the spur of the moment and took the only course that could have averted the impending doom, even for a moment, the ragged lead whistling viciously in close proximity to their ears as they took the hazardous, headlong plunge.

Ever more thoughtful for his comrade than himself, Hardy Zeph managed the fall so that he himself should receive the principal shock of the first plunge, guarding Dainty Lance with his own body. Luckily his head struck nothing harder than snow and frozen earth during that swift, confused descent, for, as he staggered to his feet, mechanically brushing the snow from his eyes and drawing a revolver from his belt, he saw that Dainty Lance had not escaped so easily.

He lay half buried in snow, his limbs awkwardly disposed, his head partially doubled up beneath his body, silent and motionless like one dead.

Such was the sickening dread that seized upon Hardy Zeph: that he had destroyed instead of saving his friend, and as he heard the exultant yells of the assassins as they scrambled down the hillside to the path, from whence they could obtain their first glimpse of the bottom of the sink, a dangerous fire sprang up in his eyes, his weather-beaten countenance became convulsed with a terrible rage that told how bitterly he meant to be avenged.

Yet he stooped long enough to draw his friend's head out from its suffocating position. He had time for no more. The enemy had reached the narrow trail, and were staring at him in mute amazement, so certain had they been of finding both of their victims dead.

With a sharp, snarling cry that sounded like the notes of some infuriated wild beast, rather than aught human, Hardy Zeph covered the most prominent figure above him, and sent a bullet crashing upward through his brain.

A hoarse, choking scream—an uplifting of arms—and then a dead body came plunging down the slope, so direct for its destroyer that Hardy Zeph was forced to leap aside, lest he be felled by a corpse.

This strange assault disordered his aim, and saved the life of another of the astounded enemy.

The three assassins were bold enough under ordinary circumstances, and had they not been so confident that their bloody work was done by their first volley, Zeph would hardly have been given time to fire his second shot.

As it was, they used their feet instead of their firearms, shrinking back and seeking the nearest cover.

Had he been alone, Hardy Zeph would instantly have improved his advantage, and settled the question in one way or another by a bold charge upon the enemy while they were thus demoralized, but in his overpowering anxiety for Dainty Lance, he allowed the golden opportunity to pass unimproved.

Spurning the dead body that lay between them with his foot, Hardy Zeph stooped over Dainty Lance, feeling as though an icy hand was fast gripping his heart. There was no motion, no outward traces of life, and as he raised the body in his arms, the head hung down so limply that he began to fear that Dainty Lance's neck had been broken by the fall.

Before he could reassure himself on this point, a crashing sound from the hillside above gave Zeph warning of fresh danger, and raising his eyes he beheld a huge bowlder dashing directly toward him.

Once more he forgot himself in his all-powerful love for Dainty Lance, and though he feared his friend was dead, he would not leave the body there to be crushed by that mass of rock, even to save his own life.

Throwing all his strength into the effort, Zeph swung the lifeless form of his friend around out of danger. He had time for no more than to fling himself at full length upon the trampled snow, when the bowlder, large as a common trunk, made the last bound that threatened to crush him to a bloody, shapeless pulp.

Carrying a cloud of mingled snow and dirt, parting the air with a roaring sound, the bowlder came and passed, not wholly without injury, though Hardy Zeph was not slain.

A sharp cry of pain parted his lips as he was rolled violently over and over after the mass of rock, for a rough corner had struck his left shoulder so forcibly that for the moment he believed his arm had been torn from his body.

This cry was echoed back by the assassins above, whose temporary panic had quickly subsided, and now they came into view at different points along the trail above, each one holding a revolver ready for use.

Blinded by snow and dirt, partially disabled by the terrible shock he had received, Hardy Zeph was, nevertheless, endeavoring to arise, in order to remove the body of his bosom friend out of danger.

Confident now that the game was in their own hands, the three men above raised their pistols and waited to secure a certain aim before firing, each so intent upon carrying out the bloody instructions they had received, that not one of them suspected the swift approach of danger until it was fairly upon them.

The fellow who stood directly above where the bowlder had been started in motion, was the first one to burn powder, but the action was an involuntary one, and the bullet he sped whistled

high through the air as his arms were convulsively flung aloft—for a feathered shaft quivered from between his shoulders, and a bright steel arrow-head gleamed with a reddish tinge before his broad chest!

A gurgling, gasping curse parted his lips—the smoking pistol fell from his grasp, and then both hands tore convulsively at the steel point that had spitted him. One moment thus, then his stiffened muscles relaxed, and he plunged headlong down into the sink of death!

Amazed, confounded, ignorant of what had caused his death, for so intent had they been upon their bloody work that neither had seen the arrow, the two survivors stared at the falling corpse in superstitious terror—but only for a moment.

A shout that can only be likened to the hoarse roar of an angry lion, broke the spell that bound them, and they turned to behold a spectacle that might have carried terror to the hearts of far bolder men than they were—a gigantic form clad in skins, bounding toward them with wonderful swiftness, considering the nature of the ground, brandishing a huge and knotted club, at each enormous stride uttering that deep, bellowing roar; a negro giant.

His close-curling wool, by persistent manipulation, had been straightened out and firmly bound into the shape of horns rising above each temple. His wide mouth was open, revealing great white teeth. His swift passage caused the tails and fur tassels of his strange attire to dangle and sway in the air. And all this, combined with his glossy skin of face and bare arms, was enough to account for the superstitious terror which seized upon the two assassins.

They believed his Satanic Majesty in person was coming for them!

The sable giant was barely a score of yards distant from the nearest outlaw when he was discovered, and before the panic-stricken wretch could think of either flight or defense, the human avalanche was upon him.

One downright stroke of the great club crushed the man to the earth, a bloody spray following that terrific blow and staining the snow for yards around.

The negro did not pause or even break his huge stride in dealing this death-blow, but fixed his rolling eyes upon the last of the assassins, and brandished his blood-dripping club as he rushed along the narrow trail.

With a despairing scream of terror, the craven wretch fired one futile shot at his terrible enemy, then turned and fled—but not far.

His foot slipped, and he sunk upon his hands and knees. As quickly as possible he scrambled up, but that instant lost was fatal to his hopes of escape with life.

With a laugh that was even more fear-inspiring than his roar, the ebony Hercules swung his club round sideways, striking the doomed wretch near the middle, sweeping him off the trail and hurling him as from some mighty catapult, over the head of the wondering trapper below, and half way across the sink.

Laughing again, as though enjoying this terrible evidence of his matchless strength, the giant twirled the club round his head as though it weighed no more than a feather, then fixed his eyes upon Hardy Zeph and crouched for a leap that should carry him within striking distance of another victim.

The young trapper saw this look and action, and reading them aright, he drew his second pistol, knowing that unless he killed the negro before he came within striking distance, his doom would be certain death.

Fortunately that stern necessity did not arrive.

"Hold, Hercules! stay your hand—your work is done!"

Clear and musical was the voice that uttered these words, but that it was all-powerful with the negro, was made clear by the complete alteration which instantaneously manifested itself.

His ferocity vanished like magic. From an avalanche of death and destruction, he became a huge, overgrown child, jolly and good-humored, slow and even sluggish in motion.

Hardy Zeph had hardly time to realize this signal transformation, before another and even greater surprise greeted him.

Like an angel of light a girl stood beside the negro, one white hand resting upon his muscled-knotted arm as she gazed down into the sink, anxiety filling her large blue eyes, her red lips parted as if in painful suspense.

Even in the midst of his astonishment—almost awe—at this strange vision, Hardy Zeph noted that her gaze was directed not toward

him, but upon the pale, upturned face of Dainty Lance.

As though there was a magic power in her gaze, Dainty Lance opened his eyes, and from his position the first objects they rested upon were the forms of the strangely mated couple standing in the narrow trail above.

The negro has been described sufficiently for all present purposes, but of his companion, a word in passing.

A more complete contrast could scarcely be imagined.

A form light and graceful as that of a fairy, in height and weight that of a child, but with the rounded limbs and swelling bust of a woman. The form clad in snowy-white feathers and fur from top to toe, a compromise between the feminine and masculine costume. The only bits of color being short curling locks of a golden hue that clustered around her face as she stooped to look downward; that face itself with great eyes of blue, ruby-red lips, and a warm flush that suffused her cheeks as the wondering gaze of the young trapper met hers fully.

In her left hand she held a strung bow, while a quiver of arrows hung over her shoulder. Both bow and arrows seemed made more for service than for show, and one unskilled in the gentle art, might have tasked his muscles severely in bending the weapon; yet the slight arm of that seeming child had sent an arrow to the feather in the tough carcass of yonder rascally assassin.

Just what he said as he scrambled to his feet and began the slippery ascent to the point where the strangely matched couple stood in smiling waiting, Dainty Lance never knew, but Hardy Zeph did, and his brow clouded as his memory flew back to those perilous days when Decoy Duck held his friend with a silken chain.

"Darn the gal-critters, anyhow!" he muttered in an undertone of utter disgust, as he closely followed Dainty Lance. "They're al'ays makin' trouble. We come here to git shet on 'em, an' blamed ef the hills ain't chuck full o' the pizen varmints!"

His left side and shoulder, though nothing more serious than a few ugly bruises had followed the blow of the bowlder, was still nearly helpless, and Hardy Zeph found it took longer to ascend the slope than to descend. Thus he missed the first words that passed between Dainty Lance and the fair stranger.

"There is no time to waste in idle speech," she said, with an impatient gesture that checked the words Dainty Lance was on the point of uttering. "No thanks are needed for what we have done, for those villains were our bitter enemies as well as yours. In slaying them, we lessened the chance of our being shot down from ambush.

"But you have only escaped a single danger. There are still a dozen and more armed men in the neighborhood, who have sworn to hunt you down to death. Another party of four are now seeking you, as these were, while the remainder of the band are lying in wait around your house, watching for your return. You will be lucky if you live to see the sun rise again!"

The young trapper listened in amazement to this rapid speech, hardly able to take in the full purport of her words.

She saw this, and stamped her little moccasined foot with impatient vehemence.

"Are you so dull, stupid, that you can't understand plain words? I tell you that Dirk Weeninx and his band of cutthroats, msqueading under the guise of honest trappers, have sworn your death. These four men were a portion of his company. They are beyond troubling you for the future, but a dozen more are left. Flight and flight alone can save you. Linger here, and you are doomed!"

"Who is this Dirk Weeninx?" gravely asked Dainty Lance.

"A demon—the chief and leader of devils second in cruel ferocity only to himself!" was the emphatic response.

"Then you are not—that is, you don't belong—"

A clear, mellow laugh cut his confused speech short.

"Am I one of his band? you would ask. Do I look like it? Would I strike down my comrades as I struck that wretch, with an arrow cleaving his crime blackened heart?"

"Who and what are you, then?" asked Dainty Lance, growing desperate as he saw the strange being motion to the giant negro, and turn as though to leave the scene of bloodshed and death.

"An elf—a changeling—a snow-sprite!" with a mocking laugh that showed she had been deeply offended by his former unlucky speech.

"Sibyl, the Snow Sprite—so you may call me in your dreams. Seek to know no more, lest your curiosity meet its fitting punishment."

"Hercules—come!" she added, turning imperiously toward the huge negro, who, leaning upon his blood-stained club, had been listening with a broad, somewhat sleepy grin.

Light and graceful as the unsubstantial creature to which she had likened herself, Sibyl glided along the narrow trail, followed by the giant black, like a well-trained dog.

Sharp as had been his repulse, Dainty Lance could not bring himself to yield so tamely, and with a deprecating exclamation he started forward in pursuit. But scarcely had he taken a second step, when the Snow Sprite turned with a warning gesture, her cheeks flushed, her eyes flashing with a fire that increased her weird, unearthly beauty.

"Back! I will not be followed nor spied upon. I have done my duty in saving your life. You have thanked me. So we are quits. Do not make me regret having frustrated the bloody scheme of those villains."

At her first word, Hercules turned about in the path, upheaving his huge club with a menacing flourish, all traces of sleepy good-nature eradicated from his face and supplanted by a dark and sullen ferocity. He cast a glance back at his mistress, only waiting for a word or signal to hurl himself upon those whom he had so recently saved from death.

Dainty Lance paused short, not through fear of the negro, but because the words of the maiden showed him he had no right to force himself upon her against her will.

His prompt obedience seemed to placate the strange girl, for her tones were softer as she added:

"The time may come when we will meet again, and learn to know each other better. But for the present we each have other duties. Yours is to escape your bitter enemies. Remember my warning, and beware of Dirk Weeninx and his band of cruel mountain vultures!"

Again she turned and sped away, this time without a backward glance. Hercules followed her, but it was plain that his suspicions were easier roused than quieted, for he cast an occasional frown over his shoulder, as though reluctant to leave the prey he had fairly crouched to leap upon.

The snow-flakes were falling faster and thicker now, and only a few moments sufficed to carry the strangely matched couple beyond Dainty Lance's range of vision. Not until they were quite lost to view did he turn toward Hardy Zeph who was beginning to grumble and rub his bruises.

"A spook—that's what she is! I'd ruther fight a hull tribe o' redskins then to hev any doin's with sech outlandish critters!"

Dainty Lance smiled, but said nothing. The anxious look which accompanied these words, told him that Hardy Zeph was not thinking of his own welfare when he spoke thus.

It may be that he secretly acknowledged there was some foundation for these fears—that he, too, felt that he was in danger. Be that as it may, he held his peace, asking no questions about what had occurred during his brief insensibility. For the present he did not care to trust his tongue too far.

He passed along to where lay the mangled corpse of the man first struck down by the giant negro, but turned away with a shudder of loathing, for nothing remained of the head and face but a ghastly, bloody pulp.

At that moment he was startled by a sharp, astonished cry from the lips of Hardy Zeph.

CHAPTER II.

AT DEATH'S PORTALS.

ACTUATED probably by the same feeling of curiosity that led Dainty Lance to examine the body of the man first slain by the giant negro, Hardy Zeph descended into the sink once more, and brushing the snow from the face of the person slain by his bullet, uttered the sharp cry that so startled his comrade.

A swift gesture decided Dainty Lance, and plowing his way down the steep slope, he soon stood beside Hardy Zeph.

"You kin see fer yourself. That ugly mug speaks plainer nor words. It gives a good reason for what the gal spook said 'bout them men huntin' our lives."

An ugly, crime-lined and sin-hardened face looked up at them through the thin veil of scattered snow-flakes; a face that Dainty Lance immediately recognized, and one that made the bitter attack upon them sufficiently clear.

Those who may have followed the varying fortunes of our boy-heroes thus far, will remem-

ber that after the tragic death of Panther Paul, and the departure of Handsome Hal with his strangely recovered wife, the young trappers returned to their snug retreat, the "dug-out" in the hillside, believing the worst of their "dals" past.

Time rolled on, and the winter, an unusually mild one, had more than half spent itself, when three strangers made their appearance in pitiable plight.

They claimed to be honest trappers, who had been attacked, robbed and hard chased by Indians, they alone escaping out of more than a dozen stout men.

The boys never doubted the truth of their story, for the men were unarmed, save one pistol and two knives between them, and had that half-famished, wolfish look that comes only of great peril and long privation.

Food was placed before them, and they ate ravenously, their hungry eyes roving around them and making mental notes of all they saw.

Neither Dainty Lance nor Hardy Zeph were blind, and that night they took turns in keep watch over their rough guests. But to all seeming this precaution was superfluous. Stuffed to repletion with hearty food, worn and weary after their forced journey, the three strangers slept heavily until the sun was high up in the heavens.

Hardy Zeph cooked them breakfast, and then the man who appeared to be the leading spirit of the trio, began to expose his hand.

The dug-out was unusually well stocked with firearms, knives and ammunition, the young trappers having collected those once used by Panther Paul and his men.

Ford—which was the name given by the burly spokesman—demanded rather than asked for an outfit of these superfluous weapons, and was quietly denied by Dainty Lance.

"Food and blankets you may have, all you choose to carry, but I don't like your looks well enough to trust you with firearms. In less than a month, by steady tramping, you can reach the settlements. Take enough meat for that length of time, a pound of powder and some lead. More than that you'll not get here."

The fellow appeared cowed by this sharp speech, and proposed that they form a partnership for the winter trapping.

Of course this was refused, and one word led to another until, in a fair fist-fight, Dainty Lance soundly thrashed the insolent fellow. Hardy Zeph, with a cocked revolver in each hand, keeping the others from interfering until the burly trapper was forced to admit that he had had enough.

In sullen silence the three roughs accepted what was given to them, and pursued their way southward, dogged by Hardy Zeph until they were many miles distant from the dug-out. For a long time, the young trappers kept a wary watch, expecting to hear more of their ugly guests, but a month or more had elapsed since Dainty Lance administered that lesson, without bringing the expected visit.

The weather gave unmistakable evidence of a change for the worse, and believing that the long-expected snow-blockade was now at hand, the young trappers set out on this afternoon to gather up their scattered traps. It was while thus engaged that they were assailed from ambush.

And now, in the face of the dead man, they recognized one of the trio who had been dismissed from the dug-out, over a month before.

The faces of the other two dead men were examined, but they were those of utter strangers.

"Then they's two more o' the critters skulkin' 'round, anyway," muttered Hardy Zeph, an ugly circle surrounding his lips. "Mebbe the gal-spook was right. A dozen an' more, she said. Long odds—an' we ain't got no Sure Death to help us fight our way through, now."

"Surer death than that negro and his club, I never want to see," said Dainty Lance, turning with a shudder from the body hurled across the sink by that terrible weapon. "But we are losing valuable time. She said they were waiting for us by the dug-out. It will be impolite to keep them longer in suspense."

Hardy Zeph did not like the short, hard laugh that followed this speech. It sounded too reckless, and from the steely-blue light in the eyes of his comrade, he knew that Dainty Lance meant mischief.

"Durn the gal-critters, anyway!" he muttered, beneath his breath. "Just the same way he looked when he went mad 'long of that Decoy Duck!"

Dainty Lance caught the substance of this booding speech, and turned sleepily away,

heading for the dug-out, his cheek flushing deeply, for Zeph's remark had struck home.

For several miles, not a word passed between them, both keeping a wary look-out in every direction, for they had not forgotten the declaration of the Snow Sprite that there was still another force out in search of them, and they gave a wide berth to every spot that seemed favorable for an ambush.

These precautions consumed time, and it was past the middle of the afternoon when they reached the belt of timber which bordered the river, at a point nearly opposite the dug-out, having thus far seen no signs of the enemy.

But now, as they stood upon the bank, peering through the matted undergrowth, an angry exclamation broke from the lips of each.

Across the ice-bound river, near the base of a high hill, they saw a dense smoke arising.

"They've got tired of waiting, and have set fire to the dug-out!" grated Dainty Lance, his eyes flashing ominously. "By the Lord that made me! they shall find something burning, more dangerous than logs!"

Hardy Zeph grasped his arm and restrained him from leaping from the bank to the snow-covered ice below.

"They'd sight us afore we could git half-way across. 'Twon't better the case none for us to lose our lives as well as property," he said, reprovingly.

"I'll not stand by like a coward, and see them—"

"No more you needn't. We kin cross the river below the bend, an' creep up on 'em without bein' seen, ef you're dead sot onto it. But it's a foolish risk, all the same. We couldn't squinch that fire now, even ef they'd 'low us to try, which ain't likely."

Dainty Lance was in no humor for arguing the case, or of listening to reason, but set off down the river bank at a rapid pace.

Hardy Zeph followed after, his honest countenance clouded with an uneasy anxiety. He saw that Dainty Lance was in a dangerous mood, and he feared that evil would come of it—and his forebodings were well founded.

Down the river for half a mile, then across it to the opposite shore, stealing along under its thinly-timbered bank.

This was dangerous, since it left them wholly visible to any one who might be standing on the other side of the river, but owing to the peculiar lay of the ground, it was the only manner in which the dug-out could be approached under cover.

By this time Dainty Lance had managed to regain partial control of his passions, and neglected no precautions as they drew near the spot which had once been their safe retreat, but which was now a mass of flame-tinged smoke.

Nearly a dozen men were carelessly grouped around in front of the blazing dug-out, laughing and jesting together as they watched the progress of the flames.

After a brief perplexity, Hardy Zeph arrived at the correct solution. These men had heard the sounds of the volley fired by their four comrades, and believed that their work was surely done, the distance being too great for a single pistol shot to reach their hearing.

They had broken open the dug-out, plundered it of weapons, food, furs and such other articles as met their wishes, then set fire to the building, through pure wantonness.

Dainty Lance saw all this, and more; for prominent among those rough forms, he recognized that of the trapper, real or pretended, whom he had so soundly thrashed for his insolence, a few weeks before.

In a fiery spasm of rage, he leveled his pistol at the unsuspecting rascal and pulled the trigger; but Hardy Zeph had been watching him closely, and the hammer fell only upon the palm of his dexterously interposed hand.

"Ef you're dead-sot on havin' a shindy ag'inst sech odds, wait ontel the right time comes, an' I won't balk ye. Just now they'd be down on to us afore we could fire a second shot, an' thar's enough on 'em to swaller us alive, ef they so keered. 'Twon't belong waitin', less I miss my guess, an' twenty-five pound o' powder'll kick up a gay old bobbery. Ef they hain't found the keg, which I don't think, them 'pizen critters is goin' to be the most discomfuddled—I told ye so!"

Not even the speaker heard these last words, for they were drowned by a deafening explosion that awoke the echoes for miles around, telling that the devouring flames had at length reached the buried keg of powder.

The stoutly fastened logs were rent asunder and hurled in every direction, like straws before

a cyclone, mingled with stones and earth as the overhanging mass of dirt was torn away by the mighty force of the confined powder.

Those standing before the building were scattered like chaff, but luckily for them, the main force of the powder was exerted in an upward direction, and only one of their number was killed or disabled.

Even the young trappers, though distant some fifty yards, were prostrated by the severe concussion, and though they quickly scrambled to their feet, for several seconds thereafter, they were kept busy in dodging the falling debris.

Dainty Lance saw the enemy come tumbling down the bank, and on the spur of the moment, believing he recognized the leader of the incendiaries, he leveled his revolver and sent a bullet through his back.

The shot, though fatal, was both a mistaken and unlucky one.

The victim Dainty Lance selected was not Dirk Weeninix, which was the real name of the man who had called himself Ford. That worthy had suffered no injury from the explosion, being knocked into the bushes, from whence he had a fair view of Dainty Lance, when his attention was arrested by the pistol-shot.

A fierce, cursing cry parted his lips as he recognized those whom he had believed dead, and at once opening fire, he shouted to his men to rally and follow him.

Hardy Zeph duplicated his comrade's death-shot, then, seeing that a moment's delay might easily prove fatal, since the enemy were quickly rallying at their leader's call, he grasped Dainty Lance by the arm and hastened toward the further bank of the river.

"We must make the rocks over yonder, an' fight 'em off ontel dark—it's our only chance!" he cried.

Dainty Lance ever grew cooler in proportion as the danger thickened, and as the leaden missiles began to hum viciously around them, he realized the wisdom of Zeph's advice. They could not battle successfully against such heavy odds out in the open, and knowing this, they sped rapidly across the snow-covered river.

The enemy, led by Dirk Weeninix, followed with mad yells, firing at every leap, but by their very eagerness frustrating the deadly purpose they entertained.

Slipping and sliding upon the snow-covered ice in their bloodthirsty haste, they did pause to secure any thing like an aim, and as a natural consequence the bullets sped wide of their mark.

True to his devoted nature, Hardy Zeph was running in the rear and striving to shield the form of his heart-brother with his own person, consequently it was Dainty Lance who first made the unwelcome discovery that their retreat was cut off by at least four enemies, who suddenly made their appearance through the tangled brush that lined the further bank of the river.

Instinct told the youth that these men composed the party which the Snow Sprite declared was out in search for them, and the exultant yells of the pursuers confirmed the fact.

The four men had been startled by the thunderous report, followed by the cracking of revolvers, and forgetting their usual cunning in their anxiety to learn the truth, they discovered themselves to the keen-eyed fugitive, who might otherwise have run fairly into their arms.

With a short, defiant shout, Dainty Lance turned abruptly to the left, racing directly up the river, by this maneuver hoping to throw both forces behind him. But it could only be done by a serious sacrifice of the brief advantage they had gained over their pursuers from the dug-out.

Shouting and yelling like veritable fiends, the mountain vultures also altered their course, taking the short cut and straining every nerve to overtake the fugitives, urged on by Dirk Weeninix, who shouted out amazing offers of golden reward, from his position in the rear of his men. His courage was not lacking, but he was heavy of foot, and could fight far better than he could run.

Active and surefooted, knowing that they were racing for dear life, the heart-brothers sped on at a killing pace, not at random, but knowing that they must gain a certain distance ahead of their pursuers, or else die.

No words passed between them. They ran in silence, but they fully understood each other. Another mile, and if all went well, they would reach a point where they could turn to bay with some prospects of success.

When half this distance was covered, Dainty

Lance cast a glance over his shoulder, and saw with a grim thrill of satisfaction that the enemy were being steadily distanced, the nearest man being fully fifty yards to the rear.

But that same glance showed him another fact that was far less pleasing. Hardy Zeph also had fallen behind him, and was now running heavily, bending slightly over to the left, as though that side was beginning to fall him in this critical emergency. And that was exactly the truth. The injury received from the falling boulder was now making itself felt, and Zeph knew that he could not last much longer.

Dainty Lance saw this, and knew that his newly conceived hope of maintaining their flight until darkness came to aid their escape, must be abandoned.

He slackened his pace, to allow Hardy Zeph to catch up, and looked at him anxiously.

"The cramps is a-ketchin' me from that lick I got," gasped the young trapper, with a sickly smile. "You run on—I'll turn over to them rocks, an' fight it out."

"Both or neither—we live or die together!"

That was all that was said then, but no more was needed, they understood each other so thoroughly.

Dainty Lance veered toward the right hand bank, not so abruptly as to give the enemy any essential advantage, peering through the slowly falling snow-flakes in search of a favorable position for defending themselves.

His face lighted up with a stern delight, for he believed he had found what he had wished, only a few rods back from the river.

A word told Hardy Zeph, and straining every nerve, they dashed ahead with a burst of speed that amazed their heavier laden pursuers.

Leaving the river and scrambling up the bank, untouched by the bullets that buried themselves in the snow around them, for now the pursuers betook themselves once more to their pistols, plainly fearing that the intended victims would yet give them the slip, unless killed or crippled by a chance shot.

The chosen spot was reached; a high, rock wall rising almost perpendicularly behind them to the height of some fifty feet, at the base of which lay several irregular fragments of rock that had fallen from above.

None too soon. Hardy Zeph had barely strength sufficient to turn around and confront the enemy as they rushed forward with ferocious yells of bloodthirsty joy, when his injured side failed him entirely.

Yet his spirit was indomitable, and dragging himself upon his knees, his right hand worked his revolver in time with those grasped by Dainty Lance.

More than a dozen against two, the enemy charged with the recklessness of men who feel that there is nothing to fear, but they quickly realized their mistake.

Steady of aim and true of eye as though he was practicing at an inanimate target with nothing of moment at stake, Dainty Lance plied his revolvers with deadly effect, not a single pellet going astray, but wounding where they did not kill. And then the no less certain weapon of Hardy Zeph opened fire, and the astounded ruffians recoiled from before that dauntless front.

Confused and thoroughly cowed for the time being, they sought shelter behind the nearest cover, leaving their dead where they had fallen, foul blots upon the virgin snow-ahroud.

The young trappers profited by this breathing spell to make the best of their position, scraping away the snow from behind a long, breast-high rock, and packing it so as to leave them several small loop-holes, through which they could observe the movements of the enemy without exposing themselves to view.

"We can hold it against double the force, at least long enough for the night to settle down and afford us a chance of stealing away under cover of darkness," said Dainty Lance, with a grim smile as he settled down to await the next movement of the enemy.

"Ef they don't take a notion to rock us to sleep from up yonder," muttered Zeph, glancing up the wall behind them. "A few dornicks set agoin' up thar, an' I don't reckon we'd be wuth much, less it was fer passages!"

This was a source of danger that Dainty Lance had overlooked, but now a single glance showed him that Hardy Zeph had in no wise overrated the peril.

Beyond a doubt the enemy could either kill them as they lay there, or else drive them out of their refuge to meet no less certain death by lead or steel.

As yet there were no signs given to tell that the mountain vultures had noted this deadly

method of attack, but the young trappers dared not hope that it would long escape their notice. Lust of revenge would sharpen their senses too keenly for that.

By this time the short afternoon was spent, and twilight was beginning to deepen into night, hastened by the steadily falling snow. And as the time passed on, our heroes began to hope anew, when they heard loud shouts from the river.

These were returned by the enemy in front, and it was clear that they were being reinforced.

"The hills is full o' the p'izen critters!" growled Zeph, in a tone of disgust, still vigorously chafing his injured side and arm. "I'll give 'em a bit o' spunk, mebbe, an' they'll make a charge. Well, we'll try to git a solid mouthful, while they're gittin' a squar' meal, anyway!"

Just then the hoarse voice of Dirk Weeninx was heard, bidding the new-comers make a circuit and reach the top of the rock-hill above their game. He briefly described their position, and bade his fellows not to spare the stones.

While he was speaking, both Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph sought to catch a glimpse of him, but the outlaw kept close covered, and they were disappointed in their hopes.

"Pears like I wouldn't so much mind goin' under, ef I could only git one squar' crack at that p'izen imp, fust!"

"I have marked his cover; do you the same. If we are forced to make a break, spot him the first of all."

Minute after minute rolled by, without sound or sight of the enemy. Dainty Lance watched in front, while Hardy Zeph directed his attention toward the rocks above, ready to give his comrade warning in case of danger.

Objects around them grew more and more indistinct, and all would have been utter darkness, only for the mantle of snow that enveloped the earth. That afforded an uncertain light, but was enough to materially benefit our friends.

It was the sense of hearing, rather than sight, that warned them of the first attack from above; a rumbling, crashing sound as a heavy mass of rock came thundering down the face of the wall.

Crouching low, they pressed close against the rocky base, ignorant in which direction to leap in order to avoid the descending missile. The ponderous mass struck fairly upon the boulder which they had used as a breastwork, shattering both into fragments, more than one of which struck the young trappers, though no serious injury was done.

A chorus of exultant yells came from the enemy in front, and was echoed back from the hill-top, as more rocks followed in rapid succession, while Dirk Weeninx and his men, as though to guard against a rush on the part of their desperate game, opened fire from a dozen different points.

"We've got to make a break!" uttered Dainty Lance, savagely, wincing as a flattened bullet rebounded from the rock and struck his cheek forcibly. "Shoulder to shoulder—we may cut our way through. It's certain death here!"

Hardy Zeph too believed that this was their only chance, but before they could put the desperate project into execution, they were startled by the rapid thud of horses' hoofs, and high above all other sounds rose that deep, terrible roar that once heard could never be mistaken for aught else—the angry bellow of the giant negro, Hercules!

And not only that, but in the sudden, almost awe-struck silence which fell upon the outlaws, there came a clear, ringing, mellow laugh—the laugh of a girl, a woman—of the strange creature who had once before befriended the young trappers; the laugh of Sibyl the Snow Sprite!

CHAPTER III. IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

ONLY once that frightful roar sounded before the giant negro, riding a black horse whose size and strength were in just proportion to those of the Colossus on its back, was in the midst of the astounded enemy, whirling his enormous club around until it fairly whistled as it cut the air, dealing an irresistible blow wherever he obtained a glimpse of aught sentient through the thickening gloom of the night and falling snow.

Beside them rode the girl who had called herself Sibyl, the Snow Sprite, looking like a fairy in company with a genie, wielding no weapon, but causing scarcely less terror in the hearts of the superstitious ruffians than did the sight of Hercules.

Of them all, perhaps Dirk Weeninx was the only one who knew or suspected the truth, and

from his position to one side, he did not immediately realize it. But as the negro swept past his cover, he recognized the huge rider and his fair companion.

"Close in, boys!" he shouted hoarsely, leaping forward, forgetting all else at the sight of his long-coveted prey. "Kill the nigger, but take the girl alive! Death to the one that dares harm a hair of her head!"

In startling contrast came the musical laugh of the Snow Sprite as she bade Hercules follow her. And then, as suddenly as they had appeared, they vanished amid the snow.

"Follow! kill and capture!" howled Weeninx. "Half my share of the treasure to the one who seizes the girl. Kill the black devil, but she is worth ter weight in gold!"

Their superstitious fears were dissipated by these words, and with eager shouts, the mountain vultures rushed through the snow in headlong pursuit of the prize they could still hear, but not see.

But little less amazed, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph stood irresolute during the bold assault that had come at such a critical moment, scarce able to believe their ears, until they caught the voice of Sibyl as she bade Hercules retreat, and heard the fierce words spoken by Dirk Weeninx.

"She saved our lives—we must aid her now!" cried Dainty Lance, overleaping the shattered rock and pressing forward in the direction taken by both pursued and pursuers.

Hardy Zeph could only follow, though he felt that such a course was rank folly, bidding fair to destroy the chance for life which the bold assault had given them.

In that gloom, and mounted upon good horses, there was little danger of their two friends being overtaken by their mutual enemy. And realizing this, Hardy Zeph lost little time in putting a cunning ruse into execution.

With a desperate spurt, he forged alongside Dainty Lance, then uttered a stifled cry as of pain, stumbling against his comrade, whose arms instinctively closed around him in support.

"Them cramps ag'in!" he gasped. "I can't run—don't leave me, Lance. Pears like I'm dyin'!"

There was a brief struggle, but then brotherly love prevailed over blind passion, and Zeph won his point.

"They can't ketch the boss-critters in the dark," he added, breathing shortly and as though in pain. "They'll soon find that out, an' then they'll be back fer our skeeps. Lend me a little boost, an' let's git out o' the track."

Dainty Lance fell into the trap, so admirably did Hardy Zeph enact the part of a disabled man, and it was well that such was the case.

Before they had hobbled a hundred yards, they could hear the voices of the outlaws returning, doubtless having realized the folly of pursuit under the circumstances.

Hardy Zeph was strongly tempted to abandon his pretense, but before he could decide, Dainty Lance pulled him down into a shallow ditch, where they broke the snow crust, and lay almost entirely buried from sight.

They could distinctly hear the rapid tramping of the enemy as they hastened back to make sure of the prey they had been so strangely led away from, and felt a grim delight as they heard the yells and curses poured forth by the infuriated outlaws when they found the nest empty.

"We are safer here than if we were running," muttered Lance in a guarded voice. "They'll never dream of our hiding so near at hand. If they stumble on us, 'twill be by chance."

Hardy Zeph made no reply, for the enemy were scattering in every direction, hoping to catch sight of or hear some sound from the fugitives.

More than once discovery was imminent, and the young trappers grasped their revolvers with a stern resolve to sell their lives dearly, but as often were they passed by unseen, thanks to the gloom of night and the friendly snow-flakes that were steadily weaving a cover for the prostrate figures in the hollow.

Thicker and faster the snow fell, though the flakes were growing smaller in size and more compact as the wind arose and the air grew colder.

The young trappers soon grew chilled in their cramped cover, and experience told them that unsheltered creatures on that night would fare but ill.

"The p'izen imps is so scattered, an' the night is so dark now, that I reckon we kin creep away without much fear o' diskivery," muttered Hardy Zeph, at length. "Them pesky

cramps has about left me, too, an' I reckon I could travel a purty good jog, ef need be."

"We must have some shelter, but where will we find it?" gloomily uttered Dainty Lance.

"The dug-out is destroyed—" "But the rat-hole ain't," interposed Zeph, alluding to the secret tunnel which had stood them in such good stead when Panther Paul and his band were waging war against them. "We kin lay hid thar ontel the wust o' the storm is over, an' them critters won't think o' sech a idee."

Dainty Lance could suggest nothing better, and confiding in the friendly darkness, they arose and moved slowly away, avoiding all unnecessary noise.

Yet the very gloom that covered their movements, led them into danger before they had gone a hundred yards.

A dark form became visible before them, almost within arm's length, and a hoarse voice uttered:

"It's like lookin' fer a black cat in a dark sular in the night-time! We might fairly bump noses, an' never know the difference ontel we felt the blood come!"

To make reply would risk discovery through their voices being strange to the fellow's ears. To brush past in silence would awaken dangerous suspicions of the truth. There was only one other course, and the young trappers took it without a moment's hesitation.

Hardy Zeph leaped upon the fellow, both hands fiercely gripping his throat, while the force of the attack caused them both to fall heavily, Zeph uppermost.

Dainty Lance knelt beside them, and guided by the sense of touch, pressed the long blade of his knife to its hilt between the ribs of the luckless wretch, then clapped his other hand over his lips, to smother the death gurgle.

But this last precaution was needless. Hardy Zeph knew that the faintest outcry might be fatal to their hopes of escape, and contracted his fingers so rigidly that they almost met through the flesh of the outlaw's throat. Not a sound escaped through that deadly gripe, which was only relaxed when it was certain that the man was dead.

"A nasty job, but better him than us," muttered Zeph, after a brief period of listening assured them that the short struggle had not attracted the notice of any of the dead man's comrades. "They begun the fight. They meant to kill, an' nobody kin fault us fer defendin' ourselves."

"I'll never sleep the worse for my share in it. Remember what she—what that lady said. Born devils, every one!"

Hardy Zeph made no reply, but immediately moved away in the lead, for he did not relish this allusion to the being who had so powerfully interested his comrade. Contrary to his fears, Dainty Lance followed without remonstrance, and a few minutes more carried them beyond the danger of being intercepted by the demoralized enemy.

Sharper and colder grew the air, and the darkness deepened as the snow descended in slanting sheets. Eyesight no longer availed them, and to one ignorant of the country surrounding them, that icy mantle would have proven a shroud.

Guided as though by instinct, and knowing that the snow would soon obliterate all traces of their passage, Hardy Zeph led the way back to the ruined dug-out by the most direct route, no longer fearing discovery.

When still at some distance, they discovered a dull light shining through the descending snow, and soon saw that, fanned by the strong wind, the logs of their once cosy home were blazing up brightly.

"The p'izen imps left in sech a hurry that they didn't stop to pick up thar plunder," observed Zeph, as he made sure that none of the enemy had reached the scene before him. "They ain't no tellin' how long the storm'll last, an' we be cooped up in thar. We must hev some grub and a few blankets, anyhow. I'd take the bull by the ears, but they'll be back yef afore long, an' that'd tell 'em we hadn't gone fur."

The temptation was strong to reclaim their own, but neither of the youngsters were so foolhardy as to yield to it. Missing the articles, the enemy would know that they could not have retreated either fast or far, and a persistent search would quickly unearth them.

Leaving Dainty Lance on guard, Hardy Zeph stole up the bank and brushing aside the snow, secured a couple of good rifles, with a sufficient supply of ammunition, several blankets and a quantity of dried meat, enough to last them for a week or more.

Brushing back the loose snow, he and Dainty Lance carried the articles to the clump of bushes which concealed the outer entrance to the tunnel. Retracing his steps, Zeph brushed the snow back into their footprints as he retreated to the cover, knowing that in a few minutes more the falling flakes would complete his precautions.

A flat stone was uncovered and raised, revealing a dark opening into which the goods were thrust, Dainty Lance entering and stowing them away, while Hardy Zeph smoothed over the snow outside. Then he also entered the tunnel and lowered the flat stone over the opening.

The air inside was warm, and from the other end of the passage, there came a dull red glow, caused by the burning ruins of the dug-out.

Investigation revealed that the explosion had caused the roof of the tunnel to cave in near that extremity, nearly blocking up the hole. Thanks to this, discovery by any one without, who was ignorant of the existence of such a place was highly improbable.

A few handfuls of dirt stopped up the opening entirely, and then the comrades, wrapped in their blankets, settled down in their close quarters, to meditate over the strange and thrilling events which had crowded so fast upon them.

Perhaps it was just as well that they were not long allowed to brood over these particulars.

Indistinct sounds from without aroused Hardy Zeph's curiosity, and cautiously removing the loose dirt, he both saw and overheard the enemy, who were crowding around the blazing logs like men who were chilled to the bone.

For a few moments he was afraid that they had been tracked thither, but this suspicion was quickly dispelled.

From their speech he soon gathered that they had abandoned the search as useless in such darkness and storm, and feeling the severity of the cutting wind as their excitement subsided, they bethought themselves of the warm blankets and furs which they had left behind them.

"Ef we hedn't bin in sech a hurry to burn the thing, it'd make a powerful snug kiver fer us from this cussed snow an' wind!" grumbled one grizzled sinner, whom Zeph recognized as the other of the three pretended trappers.

"Snug enough, but not for us," retorted Dirk Weeninx. "If it had been still standing those two young devils would have sought refuge here, and if we couldn't whip them out in the open, what show would we have stood against them in such a stronghold! Don't be a fool, Ham Toplong! At least we have a good fire to keep us from freezing."

For an hour or more, our heroes listened to the desultory conversation of their enemies, grimly amused more than once by the comments made concerning themselves.

The outlaws, freely using the woodpile amassed by the young trappers for use when the anticipated snow-blockade came upon them, kept up a roaring fire, though their utmost endeavors were not sufficient to produce warmth and comfort enough to permit them to sleep.

Dainty Lance soon had cause for being thankful that such was the case, for Dirk Weeninx, probably to raise the spirits of his grumbling followers, entered upon the subject just then most important to our hero.

His speech was too discursive for a literal report, but a synopsis is strictly essential to a full understanding of the events to follow, as well as those already recorded.

According to his statement, that wild region had at least three strange inhabitants: the Snow Sprite, the huge negro, and a half, if not wholly crazed old man who appeared to be the father of the young girl.

Lunatic or not, it was certain—so Dirk Weeninx solemnly affirmed—the old hermit was custodian of a hoard of gold sufficiently large to enrich a hundred men. He had doubtless discovered a wonderfully rich gold mine, and by playing upon the superstition of the Indians, and of the few ignorant trappers who had ventured into those regions, he had given the vicinity the reputation of being haunted.

The personal appearance of the trio was admirably calculated to foster this idea, but Dirk Weeninx had been given a glance below the surface, and was not to be thus imposed upon.

"You know now why I enlisted your aid," he added. "An enormous fortune awaits our claiming: all that is necessary to be done is to find out just where these people harbor. By discovering that, we will also unearth the treasure."

"At first, I had only thoughts for the gold,

but since then I have seen that girl; she is far more precious in my eyes. I might claim her as mine, by right of discovery, but I am not a hog among friends. I am ready to pay for my fancy, and will yield one half of my share of the treasure to be divided among you, and take the dainty lady instead."

A united cheer greeted this generous speech, and luckily drowned the sharp cry of indignation that burst from the lips of Dainty Lance as he overheard the cold-blooded bargain which, if carried out, would consign the fair girl to a fate far more to be dreaded than death itself.

With a quick motion, Hardy Zeph stopped up the hole with dirt, then firmly grasped Dainty Lance by the arm.

"I ain't ready to die yit, ef you be," he whispered, sternly.

"You heard what he said? Now listen to me," and Dainty Lance spoke with an emphasis not to be mistaken.

"The girl whom these rascals are plotting against, twice saved our lives at the risk of her own. I swear to repay the debt with my heart's blood, if needs be; whatever her fate, I mean to share it—come weal or woe!"

CHAPTER IV.

A TERRIBLE DOOM!

COLDER and more bitter grew the night. By daydawn it was blowing a gale that seemed born of an iceberg. The snow was driven with stinging force, in small icy particles.

Despite the fire which the enemy without kept up, as the only hope of keeping from freezing to death, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph could hardly keep comfortable in their blankets, thoroughly sheltered as they were in heated earth.

About noon the snow ceased falling, but the wind storm grew more violent than ever, and the young trappers experienced a grim pleasure in hearing the growling and cursing of the mountain vultures as they blew their fingers and stamped clumsily around in order to keep from freezing.

For three days that storm lasted in its bitter coldness—a storm that proved the last of earth to many a luckless hunter and wayfarer—then settled down into brisk winter weather, the thermometer hovering about midway between zero and freezing-point.

It was wearisome work for the young trappers, this being so closely confined for so many hours at a stretch, and they suffered not a little through lack of water, the only substitute being snow which they procured by raising the flat stone that covered the entrance to the tunnel. But both were pretty well inured to hardships, and doggedly stuck it out, swallowing their tasteless dried meat with what grace they might.

Yet Hardy Zeph was sorry when the sounds from without told that the enemy were making preparations for their departure, for he knew that Dainty Lance was resolved to dog them in their search for the old hermit and his companions. He felt a presentiment of coming evil, connected in some manner with those strange people, which no reasoning could banish.

Dirk Weeninx and his band took their departure, leaving a broad trail behind them, though the snow-crust was in many places quite firm enough to bear up the unsupported weight of a man.

Dainty Lance showed more coolness and prudence than Hardy Zeph had dared expect, only emerging from their close quarters when the enemy were fairly out of sight, and then holding his peace while his comrade cooked some of their venison and procured water by melting a quantity of snow.

It is not necessary to speak in detail of the next few days. Suffice it to say that Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph took the trail and dogged the enemy for miles to the north-west, finally running them to earth among the mountains, where they made their head-quarters in a commodious if dark and comfortable cave among the rocks.

By dint of cautious spying and eavesdropping, they learnt that the hermit was supposed to be living not many miles distant, still deeper in the mountains. To make sure work, the band was to scatter daily and lie in wait for some one of the trio to come forth, and then either effect a capture, or dog them back to their hidden home.

All this consumed time, and though they stinted themselves, the young trappers, at the end of a week, found themselves without a particle of food.

Hardy Zeph was pleased rather than otherwise, and Dainty Lance, though he disliked the

idea of relaxing his watch over the motions of Dirk Weeninx for an entire day, finally agreed to the plan proposed by his mate.

A portion of that night was spent in finishing a pair of rackets or snow-shoes apiece, and before the dawn of day, the two hunters were miles away from the cheerless den in which they had been hiding.

The sky was of a dull, leaden color. The air was much warmer and moister than it had been since the last storm and presently the large snow-flakes began to slowly drift down from the regions above.

"A better day for a chase couldn't be ef it was made to order!" chuckled Hardy Zeph, a born hunter. "But it'll be heavier travelin' to-night then it is this mornin'."

One less weatherwise than Dainty Lance might easily have interpreted these words aright. Unless the signs belied themselves, this was the beginning of a snow-storm of more than ordinary magnitude.

"Meat or no meat, remember this," said Lance, after a pause of some duration. "There must be no powder burned to-day. So far, we have kept those rascals from suspecting our vicinity, but a single shot might put them on their guard, and ruin our hopes of frustrating their evil plans, even if we escaped with our lives."

"I've tuck more'n one elk with my knife alone, when the snow wasn't near so deep, or the crust nigh so strong," chuckled Hardy Zeph. "We kin butcher the hull drove, ef so be we feel like it."

"Only enough for food—I am anxious to get back. Somehow I feel a strong presentiment of coming evil. I almost wish we had concluded to fast for another day."

Dainty Lance spoke with a gloomy frown that strongly impressed his comrade, and perhaps it was as well that they were so near the spot where their labors were to begin.

This was a "yard," where a large herd of elk, or, more properly speaking, wapiti deer, the stag of Canada, made their head-quarters. The young trappers had chanced upon it, while dogging the enemy from the dug-out, and were now about to profit by the discovery.

Meat, not sport, alone being their object, the youngsters used every precaution in approaching the yard, so as to be as near as possible when the game broke away, for they knew from experience that the wapiti keeps sentinels stationed on the highest points surrounding their yard, both night and day, does invariably performing that duty.

But fate was against them here. While yet several hundred yards away, a doe leaped out of a clump of bushes, and with "flag" elevated, plunged over the narrow ridge beyond which lay the yard.

Fully understanding what would follow, the hunters drew in a long breath and dashed forward at top speed, reaching the ridge just in time to see the entire herd—some two score in all—break away, a number of the strongest stags in the lead, shattering the snow-crust and filling the air with a shower of the icy particles.

It was an exhilarating sight to one in whose veins the hunter's blood flowed freely, and an eager shout burst from the lips alike of Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph as they pressed at full speed in pursuit of the royal game, for the moment forgetting all else.

When a snow-storm is in progress, it is no easy matter to break or scatter a herd of wapiti. They seem afraid of getting lost, and crowd together even when they must know that they could flee faster if not thus hampered in their motions.

The hunters knew this, and raced alongside the broad trail plowed through the snow, biding their time.

At almost any minute they could have drawn near enough to make use of their firearms with effect, but prudence forbade the burning of powder, for reasons already stated. And they knew they would risk an ugly if not dangerous fall, were they to approach the cracked, irregular edge of the snow-crust, in order to use their knives.

"We got to run 'em fer a few miles, afore we kin scatter 'em without shootin'," said Hardy Zeph.

The leading stags had now settled down to their arduous work in business-like style, no longer wasting their strength and straining their sinews by spasmodic bounds, but gallantly breasting the stiff snow crust, opening a passage for their weaker or more cunning mates.

This was killing work, for the snow was between three and four feet deep on a level, and

the crust thick. And before an hour had elapsed, the pioneers were forced to fall back and give way to others.

Thus the chase led on, straight in the wind's eye, the hunters biding their time, running steadily with practiced skill, closely watching for the proper moment to make their final effort.

This was not delayed much longer. Those running in the rear were irritated and frightened by the strange pursuers who hung so tenaciously upon their flanks, and their uneasiness was increased by the shouts which the hunters occasionally uttered. They crowded still closer upon the heels of the leaders, inflicting wounds with their sharp hoofs and staining the trampled snow with blood.

The hunters were on the point of making their effort to scatter the herd, when four of the creatures, two stags and two does, broke away from the rest, running at right angles, heading north-west.

"Them's our meat!" cried Hardy Zeph, slackening his pace, for the animals had broken away on the side of the main trail opposite to that on which they were running.

It was blundering work crossing the trail and regaining their footing upon the sound crust beyond, and while thus occupied, the four elk gained several rods additional start.

That, in a chase on such unequal footing, was but a trifle to hunters as well versed in the art of snow-shoe running as our heroes, and settling down to their work, one on each side of the trail, they drew rapidly upon their game.

Twenty minutes carried them alongside, and drawing their knives, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph simultaneously bent over sideways and by a dexterous cut, hamstringed both of the does.

At the same moment, the stag on the side nearest Hardy Zeph, wheeled half around, and in avoiding the angry thrust it made with its huge antlers, the trapper fell prostrate.

With a shrill, vindictive whistle, the maddened creature reared upon its hind feet, and plunged forward with pointed hoofs that, had they fairly reached their mark, would have perforated the lad as deftly as a spear, but with a snake-like motion, he twisted his body around and the hoofs simply touched his shoulder as the stag came down upon him with its whole weight, burying him deep in the snow.

All this transpired with the greatest rapidity, and Dainty Lance hardly knew that his chum had fallen, before he was buried beneath the stag.

He made one mighty bound, crossing the trail and alighting fairly upon the back of the stag, into whose throat he plunged his long knife, bringing it out with an upward slash, at the same time jerking the animal's head forcibly backward by the antlers.

That one cut was sufficient. With one fierce effort to free itself, the stag reared upward, then rolled over, dead, its head nearly severed from its body.

Before Dainty Lance could free himself from the fallen carcass, Hardy Zeph scrambled to his feet, a trifle breathless, but none the worse for wear. He knew that his friend had saved his life, for, incumbered as he was with the snow-shoes, the infuriated stag would have cut him into ribbons had they been left to themselves.

Few words were spoken, the warm hand-clasp being sufficient between friends who understood each other so well.

The other stag had by this time made its escape, but they had killed more than they could dispose of as it was, and without a second glance at the fleeing animal, they set about butchering their game.

This did not take long, their object being to have the most food with the least waste, and the hindquarters of the does were separated from the rest, the feet tied together and slung across their shoulders.

Scarcely was this done, when a suspicious noise startled them, and glancing over their shoulders, they beheld half a dozen men rushing toward them, having just arisen from a deep hollow that lay beyond.

Hampered though they were, and taken by surprise, the boys grasped their weapons and wheeled quickly at bay. But the snow crust suddenly yielded beneath their weight, and in striving to recover themselves, their rackets became entangled in such a manner as to cast them headlong.

Before they could arise, the enemy was upon them, choking and beating them senseless.

When they recovered their senses, they were disarmed, their arms bound behind them as they were held on their feet, up to their middle in the snow. Dirk Weeninx, their chief enemy,

sat on the carcass of the stag, before them, a devilish enjoyment written upon his rugged features.

"We have been discussing your case," said the former, with a short, hard laugh that boded ill to those he addressed. "You have done us much injury. Not counting the good men and true whom we know you murdered, four of our party are missing, and we believe that you assassinated them also."

"For all this, you richly deserve death, and so my comrades here have voted, but luckily for you, I am such a soft-hearted fool that I dislike the sight of blood shed in anger. But some punishment must be inflicted."

With another malignant laugh, Weeninx drew his knife and proceeded to cut a long strip of hide from the stag, several inches in width.

Bidding his men hold the prisoners back to back, he wound the strap around both their bodies again and again, drawing it with cruel force, and knotting the ends securely.

This arranged to his satisfaction, he fitted gags of raw hide, forcing their jaws open by compressing their throats until they were black in the face, securing the unsavory morsels by a strap passing around and tied behind their necks.

"I'm doing this all for your own good. You are young and foolish, and would only strain your lungs to no purpose—make yourselves hoarse and probably catch cold—if your jaws were left at liberty."

"As I said before, I don't mean to kill you, though your crimes richly deserve death. I leave you your lives. Here is food in abundance. Beside it I place your weapons."

"True, the snow is falling faster, and the air is getting colder. You may suffer some, but you should have counted the cost before entering upon the trail of sin."

"If you grow tired or cold, lie down. One of you can serve as a blanket, the other as a feather-bed. Your feet are at liberty if you wish to journey toward your childhood home. No enemy can surprise you, for you can keep a look-out behind as well as in front."

"Remember me in your prayers, and bless your stars that you have to deal with so merciful and soft-hearted an enemy as I! Good-by—be good to yourselves!"

While Weeninx was uttering these mocking sentences, his comrades were busy cutting up the stag and the rest of the does.

The entrails, heads and feet they placed in a heap, laying the weapons taken from the prisoners upon it, in bitter mockery.

Then, with a few parting jeers, they shouldered their meat, and strode away, leaving their victims planted waist deep in the snow, doomed to a terrible death.

Just as it had on the occasion of the former storms, the wind was rising and growing momentarily colder. Already the helpless captives were beginning to feel its effects, for their clothes had been dampened with sweat in that long, hard chase, and their hands were drawn so rigidly that the circulation of blood was seriously impeded.

The first few minutes were spent in striving to burst or slip their bands, but in vain. And then they began to realize that the end of all was near at hand.

An hour passed, the icy breath of the north wind chilling them to the bone, their limbs beginning to fail them. They tried to hobble along, hoping thus to drive off that terrible sensation of numbness—terrible because they knew that it meant death—but soon ceased, fearing to stumble, fall, and thus die all the more speedily.

Another hour and another—then Hardy Zeph felt his heart-brother fail all at once, and only by bending forward to support the dead weight upon his back, could he keep from being overthrown.

Words cannot describe his horrible sufferings—mental, for his limbs and body were nearly senseless. The knowledge that his idolized friend was dead or dying—that he was helpless to aid him—hurt him more than the belief that his own race was well-nigh run, and in a spasm of horror, he strove to move away, with the wild idea of finding help before Dainty Lance should be past recovery. For himself he cared nothing, just then. All was for his friend.

A few staggering steps, then his limbs failed him, and he sunk down in the snow, which silently closed over their forms.

CHAPTER V.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

"LOOK yonder! thar they be, now!"

The person who uttered these words was the

grizzled rascal named Ham Toplong, second in authority over the band of mountain vultures, as Sibyl aptly termed them.

As he spoke, he half-arose from his ambush and pointed down through the silently falling snow, to where two strongly contrasted figures were gliding along—one graceful and airy, the other bulky and massive; Sibyl the Snow Sprite and Hercules the negro giant.

They were nearly two hundred yards away from the point where the three ruffians lay ambushed, too far for sure shooting with the common muzzle-loading rifles of those days, even had the intervening atmosphere been clear. And they knew that the huge black was no common enemy. To miss or simply wound him, meant a life or death combat, and even with the odds of numbers on their side, the idea was not an agreeable one.

"Hunker down an' let 'em pass along," muttered Toplong, after a hurried reflection. "We'll make a dead sure thing of it afore we strike a lick. Ef they don't run afoul o' some o' the boys, we'll take 'em as they come back."

"They may take some other route back—"

"They hain't bin out in the snow five minutes," interposed Toplong in a tone that carried conviction with it. "They come out from behind that short ridge, yender, an' we'd 'a' see them ef they cross the open above or beyond."

At this moment Hercules paused abruptly and cast a swift glance around, his head thrown back, his broad nostrils snuffing suspiciously as though the air was tainted.

Silently the three villains cowered behind their rocks, the snow which had lodged upon their blankets, still further screening them. Long and closely as they had sought for these persons, now that they were found, not one of the trio but wished devoutly in his heart that the huge club-bearer would pass on without more trouble.

In this they were gratified. Hercules appeared satisfied that he had been mistaken, and once more he shuffled over the frozen crust upon his mammoth rackets.

"The overgrown critter would spot us in a minnit, ef we was to try to foller 'em," muttered Toplong, like one searching for a pretext to excuse his cowardliness. "They kin both run like race-horses. The old man an' 'most o' the boys is gone off after meat, so thar wouldn't be anybody fer to head 'em off. I o' fust idea is the best. We'll lay low fer 'em as they come back, shoot the nigger an' grup the gal."

In silence they watched the receding figures until the descending flakes shut them from view.

"There has enough snow fallen for us to track them," suggested the young fellow who had spoken before. "If we can find their hiding place, and capture the old man—"

"Don't crib other men's ideas, an' then try to pass 'em off fer yer own, boy," growled Toplong, whose sluggish wits had been unable to travel thus rapidly, but who was resolved to reap all the credit attached to the enterprise. "Would I 'a' let them pass, ef I hedn't seen a surer way o' gainin' our ends? Think I'm a durned fool!"

The young fellow made no response, and that side of his face toward Toplong bore an abashed expression very different from the roguish wink of his dexter eye.

Satisfied that he had silenced all claims contrary to his own, Toplong arose and descended the slope, supported on the snow-crust by rackets, and led the way along the plainly defined trail, contrary to the direction pursued by Sibyl and Hercules.

The recently fallen snow by this time lay an inch deep above the crust, so there was no difficulty in following the tracks for the short distance they extended in that direction.

Only a few score rods—then the outlaws came to a halt, doubt and wonder written upon their brutal faces.

The trail had come to an end, so far as the human eye could trace it, yet the solution was plain enough. The two strange beings had come up to the outer world from the very bowels of the mountain, as it were.

The men stood about midway up the mountain. Before them was the head of a small-sized, but perfect and still living glacier. The snow of course concealed many of the distinctive features peculiar to these curious formations, but there was one still visible that could not be mistaken; the yawning mouth of a huge *Bergschlund*, in places a dozen feet or more in width, irregular and fantastic, bridged here and there by the remnants of snow avalanches—a jagged, gloomy opening through snow and ice

That had apparently been accumulating for countless ages.

Straight to this black and forbidding portal, the trail extended, and as Toplong moved along the arer, he could distinguish unmistakable signs that told him their coveted game had ascended from the mysterious depths below.

No wonder they had failed to discover the secret retreat! Only for that tell-tale trail, they would never have dreamed of searching in such a place for mortal beings.

Toplong felt that he had a reputation to sustain, and though he felt a strange dislike to venture on such forbidding ground, he suffered no trace of this to show in his face.

"Whar a gal come, I reckon we kin go," he said, with a dogged growl. "Ef we stop here, the nigger'd sight us afore he come within range of our shooters. We'll go down in yonder, an' lay low. The snow'll soon liver up our tracks. The black devil won't be thinkin', an' we kin rub him out easy."

No objections were raised, for neither of the outlaws was over eager to tickle the negro giant in a fair fight. Better shiver for a few hours, and make sure work of it.

Toplong found their task much easier than he could have expected, for he discovered a small but strong robe of white hide, fastened at the ice-mouth and leading down into the depths.

Using this as a guide and a support, he dropped down upon a ledge of ice a yard below, then passed along by a series of mammoth steps, or ledges of ice, followed by his wondering, awe-stricken fellows.

First came the surface snow, sprinkled here and there with stones and boulders shot down from the cliffs above, soiled and discolored, but changing to pure white below, where it was gradually becoming crystalline, forming white, porous ice. This, again, as the wandering explorers descended further, changed to blue and green ice, ranged in layers, of beautifully contrasting shades, gently blending like the color-bands in a rainbow.

Here and there were hollows and miniature grottoes, where icicles hung from the roof, and the hoar frost sparkled in the light which descended the *Schirund*.

Though looking black and forbidding from the outside, Toplong and his mates found it was quite light below, the ice-walls and roof appearing translucent.

For a time they entirely forgot the purpose with which they had come, wandering slowly onward, gazing in silence upon the fresh wonders which every step in advance brought to view.

The icy walls were soon exchanged for others, scarcely less bright and even more beautiful, while from the roof above hung countless stalactites, showing weird and ghostly in the dim light which shone through numerous cracks and crevices hidden from any without by the carpet of snow.

Upon every hand were scattered fantastically shaped stalagmites, formed by the calcareous droppings from the pendants above, through countless ages.

How far the outlaws would have wandered, or how long they might have gazed at the marvels around them, had they not been abruptly recalled to their recollection by the sound of a human voice, can only be surmised.

Coming from the dim distance beyond, they heard a peculiar voice, that seemed addressing some one in tones of reproach, mingled with entreaty and even reviling.

Instantly their habitual craft returned, and they crouched down amid the ghost-like shapes, breathlessly listening, eagerly watching, weapons in hand.

Toplong was the first to catch sight of the speaker, for there was but one; a tall, powerfully-framed man, dressed in a long robe of gray woolen, his head bare, his long white hair mingling with his beard that reached nearly to his middle.

"Crazy as a bed-bug!" muttered Toplong, barely loud enough for his comrades to catch his words. "The old hermit, sure as shootin'! Watch me, an' bounce him all together. Take him alive, an' the big treasure is ours!"

No answer was given in words, for the hermit was now drawing near, but by the dim light, Toplong saw that he was understood and would be obeyed. The men were replacing their weapons, and preparing for their leap.

Indeed the strange looking old man did appear like one mad, as he drew near, talking aloud and gesticulating, to the ignorant outlaws, who had never witnessed a representation of the grand old play—for the veritable Shylock stood before them.

For a few moments he stood still with bowed head, as though listening to the sentence pronounced by the "just judge," the outlaws in readiness to leap upon him, but waiting until he should come a few feet nearer. This he soon did, with a swift stride that took them by surprise, and Toplong involuntarily rose erect before giving the agreed upon signal.

That momentary hesitation made all the difference between complete success and utter defeat, for, instead of being taken unawares, the mad actor appeared to realize his peril, and rushed to meet it, with a low, grating snarl of fury.

The four men sprung forward at the same instant, and the collision was severe, all being overthrown by the shock.

With a power that was amazing, the hermit shook himself free and leaped to his feet; but he showed no intention of seeking safety in flight, or of shirking the fight in any way.

Instead, he grasped one of the men by an arm and leg, lifting him high above his head, then casting him down with frightful force—not upon the floor of the cavern, but on the sharp pinnacle of a stalagmite!

The unfortunate wretch struck upon his left side, near his middle. The flint-like point pierced clothing, flesh and all, its blood-red tip just showing through the garments on his right side. One horrible screech, and the impaled wretch spun round and round as his limbs worked convulsively; then his head drooped, and he hung there, dead!

His frightful doom cowed the survivors, and with yells of horror and fear, they turned to flee. But they had roused an implacable demon, and with a maniacal cry, the madman started in pursuit, catching up a heavy stalactite that had fallen from above, and poising it in one hand, like a spear.

While wandering on, looking at the natural marvels around them, neither of the outlaws had taken any particular notice of their course, little dreaming how fatal that oversight was to prove, and now they fled at random, dodging and twisting among the stalagmites, too terrified even to think of their weapons.

Knowing thoroughly every point and turn, the mad hermit had little difficulty in cutting them off from the entrance, and by a burst of speed, came so close upon the heels of the fugitives that they separated, with panting cries of terror.

Toplong chanced to take the most difficult course, and the hermit followed his comrade, marking a vital spot at which to launch his weapon. But just as he was on the point of casting it, the fugitive tripped and fell headlong.

Before he could arise, or even beg for quarter, the terrible enemy was upon him, pressing him to the floor with one foot, then shifting his grasp to the small end of the stony weapon, he dealt a downright blow that would not have disgraced the club of Hercules. No more was needed. The man's skull was shattered like a gourd beneath a horse's hoof.

The weapon was shattered to atoms, but the hermit did not pause to look for another, wheeling and rushing in pursuit of Toplong, uttering that blood-curdling, snarling cry that could be formed by no sane man's lips.

Bewildered and utterly unmanned by fear, the grizzled outlaw rushed blindly on, almost precipitating himself into a black and yawning pit before he saw it. Too wide to leap, and reaching as far as his eyes could see in either direction, Toplong turned, only to see the mad hermit rapidly advancing.

The certainty of death, if ever those powerful hands closed upon him, lent the cowering outlaw a desperate courage, and he snatched a revolver from his belt, cocking and discharging it as rapidly as possible. Once, twice, yet still the hermit advanced, to all appearance untouched. Did he bear a charmed life? So it seemed to the despairing outlaw.

Another shot—then he was grasped by the infuriated lunatic, raised aloft and shaken with an energy that almost made his bones rattle in his skin, after which he was hurled down the black abyss, with a fierce yell of excitement.

A gasping cry—then a sudden splash of water.

CHAPTER VI.

SUBTERRANEAN SECRETS.

LAUGHING and chaffing gayly, gleeful as a child, Sibyl bore the black Hercules company through the snow-storm.

She had no definite purpose in view, but was simply acting in accordance with an uncontrol-

lable impulse that always seized her the moment the snow began falling.

It was quite as much in earnest as in mockery that she had called herself the Snow Sprite, for at times she doubted whether or no she was an ordinary mortal. She found it well-nigh impossible to remain quiet under cover during a snow-storm. At such times there was a fever in her blood that rendered her insensible alike to cold and fatigue. For hours she would wander on, singing, crying aloud for very joy, and thus unwittingly giving the vicinity the reputation of being haunted, the abode of spirits. Her musical voice would be heard, or her airy figure momentarily seen by some superstitious trapper or Indian, and the story lost nothing by being repeated.

On this day, eventful to all concerned in our story, Sibyl wandered aimlessly along, enjoying to the full the peculiar intoxication which the falling snow ever inspired her with.

It was fortunate that the larder of the outlaws under Dirk Weeninx was so low, forcing him and nearly all of his men to set off in quest of food early that morning, or the merry voice of the Snow Sprite would assuredly have betrayed her to them.

Caring nothing whither she went, docilely followed by her gigantic guard, Sibyl wandered on until quite noon, when she abruptly paused on a bit of rising ground, peering curiously through the falling snow.

Rousing from his sluggish half-sleep, Hercules grasped his massive club more firmly, muttering:

"What is it, missee? Injins or white niggers, old Herc, kin lick 'em!"

"A bear, I think, over yonder in the snow; and yet," she added, doubtfully, "it acts very strangely! It appears to be standing up, and turning round and round—"

"Like ole Herc, time he got drunk an' t'ought he was de big lighthouse down on de coast," chuckled the giant, as Sibyl made a pause of doubt while inspecting the strange creature beyond by means of a small field-glass which had hung pendent from one shoulder. "Let ole nigger go on an' see. Ef it's drunk 'bar, ole Herc—"

With a sharp cry of wondering doubt, Sibyl lowered her glass, replacing it in its case, then glided forward with all the speed she could command.

Hercules seemed well habituated to all manner of freaks on the part of his young mistresses, and immediately put his huge form in motion, thinking to pass her and throw himself between her and any possible danger from the dark enigma beyond. But exert himself as he might, he could not pass the Snow Sprite, whose interest had been strongly excited by the discovery she had made through the glass.

Hercules saw the nondescript sink down and disappear amid the snow, and shouted out an anxious warning to Sibyl, but she paid him no more attention than if she had been deaf. She sped on and never slackened her pace until she knelt beside the cold and motionless bodies of the two young trappers.

She brushed aside the snow that had fallen upon the face that was turned uppermost, showing scarcely less white than its setting, handsome as a dream despite the jaws being distended by a cruel gag—for it was the face of Dainty Lance.

A low, wailing cry parted the maiden's lips, and heedless of the presence of the wondering negro, she pressed her warm, red lips again and again to the snowy brow, displaying a fervor remarkably in contrast to the coldness and hauteur with which she had repulsed the young trapper only a few days before.

Hercules expressed no surprise, for with him, whatever Sibyl did was right, but the maiden was quickly recalled to her senses by his matter-of-course speech.

"Let de ole nigger cut dem strings, an' git de white gemmen's mouf open so he kin swallow. Den, ef a leetle o' dis whisky, added to dem 'ar kisses, don't fotch him to in a hurry, reckon he's done dead suah!"

With her own keen knife Sibyl severed the cruelly drawn bonds, and then Hercules lifted Dainty Lance and placed him upon his huge fur coat, which he had doffed and spread upon the snow-crust for that purpose, then performed the same kind office for Hardy Zeph.

Using whisky from a large leather flask, Hercules rubbed the faces of the young trappers, and poured a small quantity down their throats. Almost immediately Hardy Zeph gave tokens of returning consciousness, but Dainty Lance lay like one dead, insensible to the tender and—now that she was thrown off her guard by the terri-

ble situation in which she found him—even loving ministrations of the Snow Sprite.

Hardy Zeph's first thought was for his loved comrade, and the sight of his head lying in the lap of a "female gal," from whose eyes love beamed as tender implorings flowed brokenly from her lips, his old dread returned with redoubled force. But only for a moment. Then his every thought was given to restoring Dainty Lance to life once more.

Between them they succeeded, and Zeph fairly blubbered for joy, when Dainty Lance opened his eyes and pressed his hand, a faint smile stealing over his face.

But then, as a fairer face greeted his vision, the young trapper left the eager words of his mate unanswered, and Hardy Zeph turned aside, a dull, sickening pain at his heart, for he knew that he could never hope to rival this bewilderingly beautiful creature—this strange, weird Snow Sprite!

He listened moodily to the mutual explanations given, nor did he utter a word in remonstrance when Sibyl frankly invited Dainty Lance to share their secret home with them until the outlaws had tired of hunting for them.

There was a light in the eyes of his chum, something similar to what he observed on that past night when poor Decoy Duck was driven to her death; like, yet with a subtle difference which Zeph felt but could not fully define. He had never been in love with a woman, or he would have known that Dainty Lance was hard hit.

In silence he brushed the snow from their weapons, and picked up the rackets which Dirk Weenix had cast aside as useless. He fastened one pair upon the feet of Dainty Lance, then donned his own, and the party set out, Sibyl talking "thirteen to the dozen," so strangely animated was she.

Dainty Lance tried to keep pace with her, but neither his tongue nor his limbs were equal to the task. For the first time he was experiencing the embarrassing delights of love. He could scarcely remove his eyes from that sparkling, elfish face and graceful form, yet as often as he strove to reply to her light badinage, his tongue became entangled, and he felt a delicious tingling from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet.

He had suffered far more severely from his exposure to the cold while so cruelly bound than had Hardy Zeph, and after the first edge of the excitement wore off, his limbs began to fail him.

Hardy Zeph, whose watchful eye and all-powerful love overlooked nothing, was the first to observe this, and it was his stout arms that caught the failing trapper.

"Lean onto me, ontel your laigs gits back thar nat'ral feelin'. Lucky 'tain't so fur away to the den. Once thar, whar I kin kindle a fire, you'll be all right ag'in."

Dainty Lance laughed shortly, for he had noticed and rightly interpreted the uneasy frown of his superstitious friend, then said in a quietly resolute tone:

"You forget the invitation this lady extended so kindly. We left nothing but discomfort at that cold and cheerless den, so we need not go out of our way on that account."

Hardy Zeph said no more, for he knew from experience that he might as easily move a mountain as his friend when he assumed that tone, but Sibyl might have felt more subdued, could she have divined the stern vow that the young trapper was then registering in his heart.

Ever since learning that Dirk Weenix and his band of cutthroats were lurking around the neighborhood, the huge negro had been uneasy, not on his own account, but for the safety of his young mistress, and he chafed more and more as their return was delayed by the slow movements of the temporarily crippled Lance.

At length, with a half apology, he caught Dainty Lance by the waist and raised him to a sitting posture upon one enormous shoulder, then set out over the snow at a rapid pace, laughing in grim glee at the amazement of his companions, and holding Dainty Lance fast, despite his somewhat sheepish resistance, but Sibyl quickly reassured him.

"It is an easy seat for I have often ridden there. Let Hercules carry you until you are yourself again. There is need of haste if Dirk Weenix and his mountain vultures are around. Father is all alone. The trail we left may have been discovered and followed. On, good Hercules! We will keep you company at your best gait!"

The negro giant laughingly accepted the challenge, and shuffled over the snow at a racing

pace, Dainty Lance hugely enjoying his novel ride after the first few moments of natural uneasiness, steadying himself by a stout grasp on one of the giant's horns.

In this manner the return was made, and the party found themselves at the curious ice rift without having seen any traces of or being molested by the outlaws.

"Dey hain't been nobody here sence we bin gone, as I kin see," said Hercules, as he lowered Dainty Lance from his shoulder. "De snow am smooove, an' dar's de rope, jes' as we lef' it. Reckon de debblis ain't smelt us out yit. Better dey didn't, neider!"

Sibyl leaped lightly down into the ice rift, and thus down from ledge to ledge, Hercules following her more leisurely.

Hardy Zeph believed this his last chance, and said hurriedly as he held Dainty Lance back from following:

"No good cain't come from dealin' with sech outlandish critters—le's git out o' this while thar's time—"

What more he would have said, or what answer Dainty Lance would have made him, can only be surmised, for at that moment a shrill scream of terror came from the depths below—a scream in the unmistakable voice of Sibyl the Snow Sprite.

Breaking loose from his comrade's grasp, drawing a revolver from his belt as he leaped recklessly down the icy steps, Dainty Lance sped to the rescue; but he found only dead men to war upon.

Intending to give her new allies a pleasurable surprise, Sibyl was hastening along among the stalagmites, when she came abruptly upon a ghastly, heart-sickening sight, and covering her eyes with her hands, she sunk down upon the bloodstained floor, where Dainty Lance found her.

In scarcely less horror he too gazed at the form of the dead outlaw, impaled upon the stalagmite, a horrible grimace upon its face, with grinning teeth and staring eyeballs.

Hercules quickly discovered the other body, and dragged it alongside, where he and Hardy Zeph examined both, while Dainty Lance assumed the more agreeable task of composing the terrified maiden.

This was quickly accomplished, for it was only the suddenness of the ghastly encounter that had unnerved the Snow Sprite, and she was already recovering her usual composure when Hardy Zeph exclaimed:

"Taka kiver an' watch out fer snakes! This yer's one o' the gang outside—one o' Dirk Weenix's band!"

"They must have found our trail and followed it—and they and father had a fight!" exclaimed Sibyl, then adding in a lower tone to Hercules: "Keep them here—don't let them follow me—I must find and see him first, for if he is in one of his mad fits, there will be more murder done!"

She turned and sped away with the grace and swiftness of a bird. Dainty Lance started as though in pursuit, but the giant negro barred the way, shaking his head.

"Missee Sibyl say—'keep dem here.' Ole Herc. mus' bey orders, eben ef he hab to knock you down wid club!"

"Hark!" muttered Zeph, his bronzed face turning to a sickly yellow with superstitious fears.

A faint, muffled groan came echoing through the cavern, none the less startling in its effects that neither of the young trappers could tell whether it came from above or from below. And as they listened, they could quite distinctly make out the one word—"Help!"

"The devil an' all hisimps is in yer, an' I'm goin' to skin out—you hear me?" muttered Hardy Zeph, desperately, but the huge paw of Hercules closed with resistless power upon his shoulder.

"Mus' stay tell missee comes, debble or no debble. You try to run 'way, den you git killed, suah! Dat ain't no debble! Ole marse done pitch some o' dem poor white trash down in de hole, I reckon."

"If a mortal being, we must rescue him," said Dainty Lance, firmly. "What hole—where is it? Lead the way."

Slowly, as though doubtful whether he was not breaking the commands of his young mistress in allowing the young trappers to move even thus far from the spot where she left them, Hercules led the way to where the dark chasm extended across the cavern, down which the mad hermit had flung Ham Toplong, and from whence now came those doleful groans and feeble cries for aid.

Dainty Lance answered, and a wild yell of

joy which burst from the wretched outlaw at the sounds of a friendly human voice, told how intensely he must have suffered during those long hours.

"Cain't do nuffin' tell young missee or ole marse done comes," muttered Hercules, stubbornly, as Dainty Lance turned to him. "Kin sabs him easy nuff, but not 'less dey say so. Nobody gib orders here but one o' dem two."

He finally yielded so far as to sound a long, shrill whistle, which was answered in a few minutes by Sibyl, who made her appearance with a grave shadow upon her beautiful features.

The negro looked at her inquiringly, and she nodded.

"All is well, as far as I could learn," she said, by way of explanation to Dainty Lance. "I found father well, but sleeping. From that, I do not believe there are any more of the bad men concealed in here—"

Again Toplong cried aloud for help, and when Dainty Lance explained the discovery they had made, she bade the negro giant do what he could to save the poor wretch.

"And remember," she added, sternly. "These gentlemen are our friends. You are to obey them as promptly as you would my voice or the commands of my father. You understand?"

The negro nodded, then strode away, soon returning with a stout coil of rope and a small lantern, containing an oil lamp. This lantern he tied to one end of the rope and lowered it into the black pit.

Some thirty feet below, ran a silent but swift river, its waters inky black when viewed from above. In the middle of this, a rock upreared its crest, and clinging to the top of this, as his only means of escaping a horrible death by being swept away by the subterranean stream, was the outlaw, glaring appealingly at the faces dimly outlined above.

At the sight of a human being, Hardy Zeph forgot his superstitious terror, and volunteered to descend and fasten the rope around the fellow, so he could be drawn up.

The rope was long enough to reach the water when doubled, and so, knotting one end around his waist, Hardy Zeph grasped the other and was lowered by the giant into the pit, bearing the lantern bound upon one shoulder.

Even while securing the free end of the rope around the chest of the outlaw, beneath his arms, Hardy Zeph failed to recognize him, and soon after called aloud that all was ready.

Dainty Lance grasped the rope, but Hercules shook his bullet-head with a jolly laugh, declaring that he needed no help. Nor did he. With the apparent ease of a fisherman drawing in his hand-line, he raised the two men, hand over hand, and landed them safely upon the floor of the cavern.

Dainty Lance bent over the rescued man, then started back with a sharp cry as he recognized his bitter enemy, Toplong.

CHAPTER VII.

A GLIMPSE OF ANOTHER MYSTERY.

HARDY ZEPH burst out with an expression of intense disgust as he recognized the grizzled visage of Ham Toplong, and realized that he had taken so much trouble in order to preserve the life of one of their most malignant enemies. In truth, had not Dainty Lance caught his arm, he would have flung the fellow back to meet the doom his manifold crimes so richly deserved.

"All the same, it's well enough to make sure he can't do us any further injury," said Dainty Lance, shifting his grasp to the shivering, half-drowned wretch, who cowered before the rage of the young trapper as though his freezing bath had taken all the manhood out of him. "Take a turn or two of rope around his arms and body, Zeph."

Toplong was bound, save that his feet were left at liberty, for even Hercules did not fancy carrying the outlaw looking not a little like a drowned rat. To him, however, was given charge of the prisoner, and bearing the superfluous length of rope, driving Ham Toplong before him with many a quaint expression and jest, he followed after.

Sibyl led the way, but Dainty Lance kept close at hand and Hardy Zeph grew more and more gloomy as he saw how swiftly and surely the Snow Sprite was enchanting his mate—how Dainty Lance was being bound hand and foot in meshes a thousand-fold stronger than the rope that enveloped Ham Toplong.

To his eyes, there was witchcraft in all that had transpired. The strange maiden was an evil sorceress who had marked Dainty Lance as her next victim, soul and body. And if she

only knew it, never yet in the whole course of her strange, eventful life, had the Snow Sprite stood so nigh death's portals as she did then, with the superstitious trapper following close behind her, as she gayly pointed out the many curious and beautiful points around them.

The yawning chasm, at the bottom of which flowed the subterranean river, was crossed upon a natural bridge, narrow and not easily to be found in that semi-twilight, save by those well acquainted with the secret.

This bridge was several feet below the level of the floor of the cavern, and barely wide enough for one person to pass at a time. From beneath came up the hoarse gurgling of the secret river, and the dim light of the lantern only intensified the gloom below.

By this time the ice-chamber was left behind them, but still greater marvels were gradually unfolded with every step they took in advance.

Sibyl bore the lantern, and from a perfect knowledge of the surroundings, she could cast the steady beams from the reflector in such a manner as to bring the more salient features into view at the proper moment.

All around them were weird, fantastic formations, brought into startling prominence by the dexterous manipulation of the light, only to fade away as though retreating from the human invaders, offended by this rude intrusion on their privacy.

Considering their close proximity to so much snow and ice, the air in this remarkable freak of nature was remarkably dry and warm. The Snow Sprite laughed when Dainty Lance alluded to this fact, and at once extinguished the light of the lantern she bore.

Comparative darkness reigned around them, but from ahead came a soft, mellow light strongly resembling that of the summer's sun, a light that deepened and grew more brilliant as they advanced.

"We need never stint our fires down here," said the Snow Sprite, directing the attention of Dainty Lance to the walls around them, where the glistening rocks were replaced by masses of hard, sparkling coal. "Fuel is plenty, and easily procured. We keep good fires constantly going, and this, added to another convenience which you shall shortly inspect, is what renders these subterranean chambers so comfortably warm and dry."

Making one or two more sharp turns, the party came out upon the verge of an immense vaulted chamber, the roof of which hung full of stalactites, glittering and looking weirdly beautiful in their countless shapes in the brilliant light that was reflected from their prismatic points.

The floor was of rock, smooth and level as that of an ordinary room. If there had ever been any stalagmites, they had been cleared away.

From the floor, in the center of the chamber, leaped up an inverted pyramid of flame that appeared to be the work of enchantment, since no fuel was visible.

Rising half-way to the roof, or double the height of even giant Hercules, this pyramid of fire gave out an intense heat, burning without any noxious fumes.

"Hercules," said the Snow Sprite, "tie your prisoner some place where he cannot be readily seen by—by any one coming in here. Then prepare food."

A perfect understanding seemed to exist between the strange couple, for Hercules asked no questions, but fell back with his prisoner and bound him to a projecting spur of rock, deep in a snug niche.

This done, he soon produced pots and pans from a recess in the wall, and igniting a long torch at the pyramid of flame, he retreated a few paces, stooped and swung the torch around in a circle, almost brushing the rock-floor.

Dainty Lance was both interested and amused to see half a dozen small spouts of flame spring up above the dusky giant, over which he placed his utensils with the careless indifference of one hardened to such wonders.

But Hardy Zeph was trembling like a leaf. Strangely superstitious, he began to believe they had descended into the infernal regions, from whence they would never be able to escape with life or souls. He had never before seen gas used as a medium of diffusing light or heat, and under the circumstances his fears were but natural. Only for Dainty Lance, the ignorant trapper would have turned upon his heel and sought safety in headlong flight.

Dainty Lance understood his feelings, and took pains to give him a correct idea of what looked so diabolical at first sight. So earnest was he, that before Hercules had prepared his

meal, Hardy Zeph breathed more freely, though still watching the "gal-witch" closely.

While the giant was thus occupied, Sibyl, speaking in a graver, more subdued tone than was customary with her, gave a brief explanation of her reasons for leaving her guests so uncereemoniously, on discovering the tragedy which had taken place in the ice-chamber.

"I do not know whether all men are so, or not," she said, gazing intently into the handsome eyes of Dainty Lance, "but my father has two separate natures, lives two distinct lives. He has books which tell about mad people. I have read them, and I believe that at certain times he is insane."

"Whenever those spells overtake him, he is terrible—sublime—a human lion! Hercules, yonder, is but an infant in his mighty grasp, then. And from the manner in which those wretches had been slain, I felt sure that another of these mad fits had seized upon my father."

"Fortunately they are of brief duration. I have never known them to last over an hour, and sometimes they come and go like a thunder-bolt. But one result invariably follows. The fit past, father retires to a secret cell, and there falls into a deep slumber that strangely resembles death itself. So I found him when I left you in the ice-chamber. He may lie thus for hours, or he may rouse up at any moment; but whenever he does awake, it will be as himself, in his sober senses."

"It is a strange story," said Dainty Lance, thoughtfully; "but no more strange than that such a peerlessly beautiful creature as you, should lead such a life, in such a spot! Why is it? Why does your father keep you here?"

His words were checked by Sibyl placing her warm palm over his mouth, her face sober, a little frown wrinkling her brows, her voice almost stern as she uttered:

"Never again ask those questions—never approach that subject, for it is a forbidden one, even to my lips. Once I was as curious as you, and I asked my father what you have asked me. Never before or since, even in his maddest spells, have I seen him so terribly agitated; never before had he laid an ungentle hand upon me. But in that moment I tasted the full horror of death!"

A convulsive shudder agitated her frame, and bowing her face upon her hands, she sat there in silence for several minutes, Dainty Lance not knowing how to offer the consolation he yearned to give.

"Ef we only live to git shet o' these onairthly critters, an' breathe the free air o' daylight once ag'in, durned if I don't believe I'll git 'ligion powerful an' take to exhortin' fer the rest o' my days!" muttered Hardy Zeph, in a tone of mingled disgust and superstitious dread.

Hercules effected a timely diversion, by announcing the meal in readiness for discussion, and tossing back her golden curls, Sibyl raised her head, all traces of strong emotion gone, once more the sparkling, brilliant Snow Sprite.

Even Hardy Zeph did ample justice to the smoking viands, for long fasting and short commons enabled his appetite to subdue his superstition.

Suddenly Sibyl rose and with a glad cry, darted forward to meet a tall, dark figure that had paused on the edge of the chamber furthest from the passage by which our friends had been conducted thither.

The young trappers gazed with no little curiosity upon the new-comer, whom they guessed, and rightly, to be the father alluded to by Sibyl in her brief explanation.

It was the same person whom Toplong and his fellows had attacked a few hours earlier in the day, though they might well have doubted the fact.

Now he was dressed in black, a little seedy and threadbare, but faultless in style and cut. His hair, iron gray, was clipped close to his skull. He was younger, seemed taller and more slender than when in his guise as Shyllock.

Though several rods of space intervened, the young trappers could see by the brilliant light that the stranger was displeased at finding them inmates of his strange retreat, and that the dark frown still corrugated his brows, despite the earnest, if subdued, speech of Sibyl.

"He ain't no sorrier we're here than I be!" muttered Hardy Zeph, doggedly. "I'd give a year's trappin' ef we was only out o' yere, safe an' sound."

A startling change came over the hermit. He brushed Sibyl rudely aside, and strode forward, his burning gaze riveted upon the face of Dainty Lance, who arose at his approach, wondering at

the powerful emotion which was pictured on the face of the hermit.

Twice the strange being strove to speak, each time only a harsh, unintelligible sound rattling in his throat.

"Who and what are you?" he at length managed to utter.

"My name is Lancelot Daintree, and at present I follow trapping for a livelihood," replied Dainty Lance, despite the wonder which this harsh address awakened.

The hermit strode forward, seemingly without having heard the answer to his question, and with a hand that trembled like a leaf in the breeze, touched the young trapper on the arm, then on the brow.

"Alive! it is no phantom—no ghost of the past, risen up to haunt me—"

"Sir," eagerly interrupted Dainty Lance, his cheeks flushed, his eyes glowing hotly, "if you know aught of my past—if you can solve the mystery that has enveloped and overshadowed my life from infancy—I beseech you tell me—tell me of my parents!"

The hermit drew back, and passed one hand quickly across his eyes and forehead, then stared at the eager youth as though striving in vain to comprehend his meaning. A short, hard laugh parted his lips.

"What is it you would know of me? I can tell you nothing. I am no magician—no dealer with the devil, though I bear that reputation among the ignorant fools who sometimes wander into these parts. All I know is what you said but now."

"You appeared to recognize me—" faltered Dainty Lance.

"It was but a foolish fancy, born of a terrible struggle which I recently passed through, and the effects of which I still feel in my overheated, throbbing brain," responded the hermit, speaking slowly and with a coldness that seemed studied and artificial. "I do not mind confessing it, for it is more a misfortune than a disgrace. At times I am subject to fits of madness. And while one of them was upon me, I was attacked by three ruffians who sought to murder me. I killed them, after a frightful struggle. And one, the last of the trio, as I held him aloft, before hurling him down to the center of the earth, cried aloud for mercy. It was his voice that I fancied I heard when you spoke—and his face I saw reproduced in yours. For a moment I fancied my brain might still be unsettled—that you were a ghost—a phantom. For that reason I touched you."

Dainty Lance saw Sibyl flush deeply and turn away. He lowered his own eyes, for he knew that she believed as he did, that the hermit was speaking falsely, that he was giving an untruthful explanation of his strange agitation.

Not even a madman could trace any resemblance, however faint, between grizzled Ham Toplong and the handsome young trapper, either in voice or feature.

"Father," said the Snow Sprite, speaking softly, "if you have suffered remorse for the death of that man, be comforted. He is not dead—we heard his cries for help, and rescued him from the secret river—"

Her words were cut short by a grating snarl from the hermit, whose white teeth looked wolfish as he glared around in quest of the outlaw. Then, as nothing met his gaze he turned upon Sibyl with a short, forced laugh.

"I see—you are jesting—it is a good joke! Bah! I am a fool! Did I not hurl him down to certain death? Did I not hear his horrible death yell? Ay! and it is still ringing in my ears! The luckless devil had a most discordant voice!"

"Father," seriously replied Sibyl, "you never yet knew me to tell you a falsehood, even in jest. I speak the truth, now, when I say that we rescued the wretch, alive—"

"Where is he?" grated the madman, for such he seemed to become as he grew convinced that the Snow Sprite was speaking the truth. "You have not set him free?" turned him loose to go and tell what he has seen? Girl! you know not what you have done! He will tell them—they will come, an army, to steal you away from me, to rob me of the only treasure life has left—and then they will hang me on the shameful gallows—hang me by the neck until I am dead—dead!"

Covering his averted eyes with one hand, he held forth the other, tremblingly, as though seeking to drive away the horrible vision his words had conjured up, exhibiting such emotion that Sibyl hastened to reassure him.

"No; we held him captive. He is safely bound, and Hercules has stowed him away until—"

Sternly, his eyes glowing with the fires of

madness, the hermit turned upon the waiting giant, and fiercely demanded:

"Show me where he is—quick! or I'll murder you!"

Hercules pointed out the rocky recess in which he had bound Ham Toplong, his little eyes glowing as though he hugely relished the idea of the impending tragedy.

The hermit caught up the huge club usually borne by the negro giant, and with a panther-like scream of ferocious anger, bounded toward the recess.

"Save him—save him from committing murder—for my sake!" cried Sibyl, to Dainty Lance, imploringly.

Glowing with a strange exultation, the young trapper sprang forward, but speedy as were his movements, he would have been too late, had Toplong been in the recess.

But he was not—he had vanished as by magic!

CHAPTER VIII.

A BLACK LION.

A WILD, fierce cry of surprise broke from the lips of the mad hermit as he found the rocky recess empty, and he turned upon the group behind him as though suspecting them of having played with him. But the blank amazement imprinted on each countenance could not be mistaken, and then he noticed the rope which had been used to bind the outlaw.

This lay upon the floor, cut in several places! Beyond a doubt, Ham Toplong had been set free by some friend—so at least our friends reasoned.

One and all they realized the great danger of allowing the outlaw to make good his escape. Bitterly vengeful both by nature and training, he would hasten to reveal all he had discovered to his evil associates, the mountain vultures, even if he did not guide them to the secret home for which they had searched so long and ardently.

Quick-witted Sibyl was the first one of the party to act decisively, crying aloud to Hercules:

"Go—hasten to the ice-chamber! He must have gone in that direction, since he could not have stolen past us unseen. You can get there first—intercept and capture him—for your life!"

At her first words the sable giant stooped and picked up the huge club which the mad hermit had dropped, and was darting away on his mission when the latter addressed him, in a hard, grating voice:

"Kill, not capture! Kill him, crush him, break every bone in his body! He has gone to call them—to bring the hangman. I feel his clammy grasp upon my throat, now—not it is the rope—the hangman's noose!"

The madman grasped convulsively at his throat, as though striving to tear away the noose which he in fancy felt suffocating him, his face livid, his eyes wildly protruding, a bloody froth fringing his lips.

He staggered back and would have fallen, only for the support which the Snow Sprite afforded him.

Dainty Lance made as though he would relieve her of this burden, but the stricken man shuddered violently at his approach, and Sibyl motioned him away.

"Leave him to me—I alone can soothe him and drive away the evil spell that is battling for the mastery. For some strange reason, the sight of you excites him dangerously. It will soon be over; only a few minutes."

Forgetting all else in his intense interest in the dramatic scene, Dainty Lance slowly withdrew deeper into the shadow, accompanied by Hardy Zeph. And from there he watched the tender ministrations of the Snow Sprite, until a terrible, prolonged roar echoed throughout the cavern and its many passages—the sound that, once heard, could never be forgotten; the angry battle-cry of Hercules, the negro giant.

The giant had only paused long enough to hear the first words of his crazed master, which he received with a broad grin and a display of gleaming white teeth that told plainly enough which of the two widely variant orders he would prefer to follow; then twirling his enormous club as though it weighed no more than a feather, he bounded away in quest of the escaping outlaw, taking the most direct route to the ice-chamber.

It may be stated here that Ham Toplong had effected his escape unaided by friend or foe. A cunning rascal was he, whose life from early childhood had been one fitful struggle against all that was good and honest. Though encoun-

tering many a reverse, he was always lucky enough to win his way clear in the end, nor was this occasion an exception.

The moment Hercules left him in the rocky recess, so bound that an escape unaided seemed among the impossibilities, he began his efforts, and in the course of an hour had succeeded in freeing one hand and arm.

This done, he soon produced a small pen-knife from its place of concealment in the collar of his heavy flannel shirt. Its blade, though so tiny, was keen as a razor, and in five minutes more, the ropes were severed, and Hans Toplong stood a free man, so far as bonds were concerned.

It was at this moment that the mad hermit made his appearance in the "dining-room," but Toplong did not pause to note the curious scene which followed.

"Next thing it'll be that crazy, white-headed galoot," he muttered, for such a transformation in the hermit deceived him, "an' ef he once smells me out, it's good-by John! Guess I'd better skin out while I got the chance!"

A wise resolution, which he lost no time in putting into execution. Stealing silently away, he attempted to find his way to the rift through which he and his ill-starred mates had descended into the wonderful ice-chamber. But this he found was a more difficult task than he had anticipated.

The passage was winding, the dim light deceptive, rendered doubly so by the weird, fantastic forms around him on every hand. And ere he had spent many minutes thus, Ham Toplong found his garments wringing wet with the cold perspiration that streamed from every pore—drawn forth by the knowledge that his escape might be discovered at any moment, when relentless enemies would hasten upon his track.

Nor was this all. Time after time he fancied he saw those enemies moving silently forward to bar his way, deceived by the uncertain light which seemed to endow the fanciful shapes around him with life and motion.

At length he was checked by the yawning pit, and lost several valuable minutes in hunting for the narrow bridge by which alone the barrier could be crossed.

The dim light was fading as the afternoon waned, and the discovery was made by the sense of feeling, rather than eyesight. Fearful of missing his footing, and being precipitated into the inky waters that rumbled and growled in the depths below, Toplong straddled the narrow bridge when found, and hitched himself across, inch by inch, reaching the further side in safety.

Safety he now felt it to be, for from no great distance ahead he could see the light which shone through the perforated roof of the ice-chamber; but just at that moment he heard the frightful roar which black Hercules uttered at first catching sight of his intended victim.

Even if armed to the teeth, Toplong would not have dared to confront the ebony giant, and now, knowing that his life depended upon his lightness of foot, he dashed toward the ice-rift with a speed that at any other time would have amazed himself.

Roaring again and again, the giant bounded on in pursuit, like an enraged lion, crossing the chasm by the bridge, though only one foot touched the stony arch, so mighty were his leaps, then, on, on, brandishing his blood-stained club which seemed as eager for another victim as himself.

But the distance was short, and life was sweet even to the sin-steeped vulture, who reached the ice-steps fifty yards in advance. Rendered doubly active by his wholesome terror of the giant, Toplong sprang swiftly up the rift, and seeing that he would reach the outer world before he could be overtaken, Hercules whirled his club around his head, then hurled it with terrible force at the fugitive.

The border ruffian would have fled further, had not his foot slipped, bringing him to his knees upon the last ledge but one, for the viciously cast missile passed over him, not a foot above his head, striking the solid ice with a force that sent the sparkling splinters in every direction, then rebounding and falling at the feet of the negro as he came dashing along.

With a yell of terror, Toplong recovered his feet and scrambled up the ledge and out of the ice-rift, while Hercules, snatching his club from the floor, hastened on in swift pursuit, determined not to lose his victim.

It required but one mighty bound to clear each one of the ice-ledges, and as he leaped up from the rift, into the snow outside, he caught a glimpse of Toplong, not twenty yards away,

floundering through the deep snow, the crust yielding beneath his feet.

A fierce roar of triumph burst from the giant's lips, but then came a startling change.

Through the rapidly falling snow-lashes that deepened the twilight, several rifles flashed, and even before the reports could have reached his ears, Hercules uttered a wild cry of pain, and fell heavily backward, his body bounding from ledge to ledge, bringing up on the icy floor with a force that seemed sufficient to shatter every bone in his carcass.

That horrible cry was echoed back in a yell of relief by Ham Toplong, for he recognized his friends and comrades in the new actors on the scene, and in a few moments more he was surrounded by Dirk Weeninx and a dozen of the mountain vultures.

Their opportune appearance—for Toplong—may be briefly explained.

It was while out on a foraging expedition that Dirk Weeninx and his men encountered the two trappers, whom they doomed to a cruel and apparently certain death.

The meat which the boys had killed, proved all they could carry, and without hunting any more, they returned to their temporary headquarters. Near the middle of the afternoon, Dirk Weeninx took a scout, and chanced across the trail left by Sibyl, Hercules and Hardy Zeph.

In hopes that this was the long-sought-for clew, Dirk followed the trail to the ice-rift, and rightly divining that this was the entrance to the secret home, he hastened away to collect his men, returning just in time to save Ham Toplong from a richly merited death.

By a few sharply-put questions, Dirk Weeninx managed to extract from his chum a tolerably correct idea of all that had occurred, and how matters stood below.

He was amazed and bitterly chagrined when he heard that the hated trappers were among the defenders of the subterranean home, alive and none the worse for their adventure; but he was no personal coward, and this totally unexpected news rendered him all the more resolved to accomplish his ends.

"The worst of the lot is disposed of," he said, pausing to reload his rifle. "We can easily manage the rest. There may be some little danger, but remember what I told you about the golden treasure which the crazy hermit has secreted somewhere below; enough to pay for ten times the risk we may have to run."

"One bold charge will do it. Kill the men, but spare the girl. She must tell us where the treasure is hidden."

The men, with the one exception of Toplong, were ready enough to advance, for in the fall of the giant negro, they felt that more than half of their work was done, and, headed by Dirk Weeninx, they rushed toward the rift.

Only to pause again, in utter dismay, for the dead had come to life again, and the huge bulk of the negro uprose from the rift, brandishing his club, looking more like a demon than ever, in the streaks of blood that lined his face, arms and breast.

With a roar of rage that was fairly awe-inspiring the sable giant plunged forward through the snow to attack the enemy, too terribly enraged to think of counting the odds, only seeing the deadly foes of his loved master and mistress, and, many as they were, the mountain vultures seemed more inclined to flee than to await his impetuous assault.

Still, it was fortunate for the negro that he had good backing. Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph had lost as little time as possible after hearing the first cry of Hercules, and now opened fire from the ice-rift.

Both of them thought of Dirk Weeninx, and sought to single him out from the rest, but the rapidly falling snow and the twilight combined, proved his safeguard.

At the double report, two of the outlaws fell dead, and casting aside their empty rifles, the young trappers drew their revolvers and rained a hailstorm of lead upon the enemy. They were too good marksmen to waste many bullets, despite the unfavorable conditions, and with cries of dismay, the surviving outlaws turned to seek safety in flight.

Dirk Weeninx saw that the negro would soon overtake them, despite the advantage they possessed in being provided with snow-shoes, and as soon as he felt himself beyond range of the ice rift, he turned and taking deliberate aim, fired at the giant black.

Uttering a snarling roar of mingled rage and pain, Hercules staggered, then fell prone in the snow, as the outlaw resumed his flight with an exultant yell.

Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph, by this time rejoined by Sibyl and the mad hermit, on witnessing the fall of the black lion, rallied forth to the rescue, finding him still living, though to all appearance mortally wounded.

With their aid, he managed to arise and stagger back to the ice-rift, down which he was assisted. Then Sibyl and her father, whose brain seemed calmed by the cold air of the outside world, led him away between them, to where they could better attend to his injuries.

Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph were left behind to guard the entrance in case the enemy should recover from their discomfiture sufficient to renew their attempt.

But as the time passed on, without any sign or sound from them, Dainty Lance gradually fell into a reverie deep and strangely mingled with doubt and pleasure.

He could not hide from himself that he was in danger, such as had never before threatened him—in danger of falling over head and ears in love with Sibyl the Snow Sprite. Only for the strange repulsion which he felt for the mad hermit, Dainty Lance would not have felt much troubled on this score. But he felt that there was something black and dreadful in the past of that strange being; something connected with his own past. On no other grounds could he account for the powerful emotion displayed by the hermit, when first they stood face to face. There was abject fear written upon his death-like countenance—fear, mingled with bitter hatred!

Who and what was he? Why was he hiding in such a strange habitation? Why did he fear and hate him? Why should he feel the noose of the hangman throttling him?

All these and many more queries of similar import passed athwart the brain of the young trapper as he crouched there in the chilly ice-chamber, on guard.

So deeply was he buried in thought that he failed to notice the dark, phantom-like shape that was slowly and silently creeping toward him, from the rear.

Inch by inch the shadow-like form crept nearer, upon his stomach, bearing a long, keen knife between his tightly clenched jaws—nearer to the unconscious dreamer, whose fate seemed inevitably sealed.

The moments passed on, each one bringing the shadow a trifle closer to its intended victim, until only a yard or two separated them. Then the assassin silently rose to his knees, grasping the knife in his right hand. Inch by inch he rose erect, measuring his distance, then leaped forward, alighting close behind Dainty Lance.

But a splinter of ice crushed beneath his foot, just as he crouched for the leap, and hearing this, Dainty Lance turned his head and caught the faint gleam of the bare steel as it was elevated for the death-blow.

Quick as thought he flung himself backward, striking against the legs of the assassin, clutching them with his hands, and throwing all his strength into the effort, he cast the unknown heavily forward upon the floor.

The shock stunned the would-be assassin, and Dainty Lance, rendered furious by this unprovoked attempt at murder, drew his own knife, and was about to pounce upon the quivering form, when a shrill scream checked his hand as the Snow Sprite appeared.

"Spare him—he is my father!"

True enough, the assassin was the mad hermit!

CHAPTER IX.

WAITING AND WATCHING.

As she uttered these words, Sibyl, the Snow Sprite, rushed from out the denser gloom and sunk upon her knees beside the form of the baffled assassin, her hands clasped, her beautiful face uplifted to Dainty Lance. And in that moment he knew that, let her ask what she might, he could never refuse her, when she appealed to him thus, with that imploring look.

"I do not wish to injure him," he said, with difficulty speaking clearly. "I thought it was an enemy—I saw him stealing upon me with uplifted knife."

"I know—I too saw him, and I strove to cry out in warning, but my tongue refused its office. I could not speak. I could only stand here as though petrified. Yet all the time it was as though he was pressing his knife home to the center of my own heart!"

She uttered these words with an air of bewilderment that was a revelation in itself, and had Dainty Lance been a little more experienced in heart-matters, his own would have leaped for joy. Ignorant of the fact, Sibyl was exposing

the fast-opening blossom of love that had taken root in her bosom. Fortunately, perhaps, the young trapper was still too greatly agitated by the discovery of who was the assassin, and the dramatic appearance of the Snow Sprite, to observe closely just then.

Hardy Zeph knew nothing of the danger until it was past, else the matter would not have ended without the shedding of blood. As it was, Dainty Lance had to speak to the faithful fellow with unusual sternness, to prevent his exacting a bitter revenge.

The mad hermit had fallen upon his head with force enough to render him insensible for a few minutes, but the rather profuse flow of blood from a wound in his scalp, where it struck against an ice splinter, apparently did him good, for when the united ministrations of Dainty Lance and Sibyl restored him to consciousness, his insane passion was gone, and he appeared as meek and gentle as a reformed child.

Not a word did he speak, however, avoiding the eyes of Dainty Lance as though ashamed to face him after having been foiled in such a murderous attempt.

The young trapper did not particularly note this; he was far more interested in the maiden; but Hardy Zeph did, and when Sibyl led the strange man away, his suspicions would be suppressed no longer.

"Wuss then a bloody Injun, that p'izen critter is! an' it's ruinin' the rest o' your life every minnit ye stop in this outlandish hole. He's chavin' a bullet fer ye, from some cause, an' he'll murder you yit, unless he gits rubbed out fust hisself."

Dainty Lance made no reply; in fact he failed to realize the full meaning of his friend's speech, even if he heard it at all. Sibyl's parting touch was warm upon his hand, but a thousand times warmer in his heart.

"The sooner we skin out o' yere, the better it'll be fer the hull kit an' caboodle," added Hardy Zeph, encouraged by the seeming acquiescence of Dainty Lance. "They ain't nothin' nat'ral nor human-like in yere; devils an' spooks—gal-critter, nigger an' dead-face, thar! An' the gal-spook is the most dangerous—"

"Zeph, if you love me, not another word against that angel," said Dainty Lance, rousing up and speaking with a quiet earnestness that was even more convincing than a louder, more impetuous tone would have been. "You have been my truest and only friend, thus far; don't let us quarrel now."

"You know I couldn't do that, ef I was to try," blurted out the honest lad. "But all the same, I say let's skin out o' here while we kin do it on our own legs—"

"When I go, or how, depends mainly on another, Zeph," interrupted Dainty Lance, speaking with an unwonted softness in his tones. "The next few days, or it may be hours, will decide my entire future, for weal or woe. I mean to win Sibyl for my wife, if I can. If she refuses me, or cannot return the passionate love which I feel for her, then I care not what becomes of me—the wilder the life, the better. But if she smiles upon me, as I hope and pray, then—then—"

"It'll be good-by pard! an' Zeph Hardy kin go to the devil as soon as he durned please!" supplemented the young trapper, with a hard, bitter laugh.

"There is room in my heart for a true friend as well as a loving wife, mate," said Dainty Lance, softly, his hand seeking out the rough paw of the other. "And my home shall be yours as long as you care to make it such. True, there will be a great change, if I am so blessed as to win what I have set my heart upon gaining. This life is too wild and barbarous for such a dainty little woman, and we will return to a civilized land. But not without you, old boy. I could as soon part with my right hand!"

There was much more said on the subject, by both parties, but probably the conversation was more agreeable to them than a report here would be to the reader.

Suffice it to say that an hour was thus spent, Dainty Lance meeting and overcoming each objection raised by Hardy Zeph, who finally began to feel that, after all, there might quite as much good as evil result from the encounter with these strange people.

They were not so wholly absorbed in the matter under discussion as to neglect their duty, and the most crafty enemy could not have entered the ice-rift without their discovering him, despite the gloom.

Without, the storm seemed to be holding its own, if not increasing in intensity. The wind was rising, and from its shrill whistling and howling, the young trappers felt little fear that

the surviving outlaws would dare its fury, so soon after their bloody repulse.

They drew closer together for warmth, for, though protected from the biting wind, it was bitterly cold in the ice-chamber. Still, though feeling tolerably sure that the enemy had retreated to their quarters, the lads would not desert their post, and were still conversing earnestly when they saw Sibyl approaching, bearing a small lantern.

"You must not remain here in the cold," she said, softly, addressing Dainty Lance as he arose to greet her. "It is not likely that Dirk Weenix and his ruffians will trouble us again very soon, but even if they should make the attempt, we will receive warning in ample time to defeat them."

Neither Dainty Lance nor Hardy Zeph raised any objections. The ice chamber was not very enticing on that bitter cold night, and the prospect of a warm berth beside the pyramids of fire was particularly alluring after their cold vigil.

Sibyl led the way across the natural bridge, but at the beginning of the passage beyond the chamber, she paused and handing the lantern to Dainty Lance, drew out a coil of rawhide from a niche in the wall. At intervals along this rope were hung small brass and steel bells, which rung out clear and distinctly with every motion of their support. The rope was long enough to pass twice across the mouth of the passage, and Sibyl arranged it thus, the lower strand being about knee high and the second one some two feet above this.

If an attack should be attempted that night, the enemy could not possibly pass by without setting the bells to jangling, unless they bore torches or something of the kind to light their way; and this, of course, they would not be fools enough to do, on a hostile expedition.

The arrangement was an ingenious one, and much admired by both of the young trappers, who foresaw a prospect of some much needed sleep.

They were soon at the pyramid of fire, warming their thoroughly chilled bodies, while Sibyl busied herself in a little recess something similar to that in which Ham Toplong had been confined.

Her preparations were soon made, and returning, she told the young trappers that they might retire to sleep as soon as they felt inclined.

Dainty Lance felt that he would gladly remain awake for a week, if by so doing he could be sure of having her constantly with him while waking, but while he was striving to shape the thought into suitable words, the Snow Sprite bade them good-night and abruptly retired.

Satisfied that the enemy could not pass the bell-rope without creating noise sufficient to awaken them, and wholly ignorant of the fact that there was another passage by which the curious cavern might be entered, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph, with a final look at their weapons, passed over to the little recess alluded to, where they found an abundance of furs, skins and blankets prepared for their comfort.

Despite the fact of his being over head and ears in love, Dainty Lance was worn and weary enough to fall asleep almost immediately after lying down.

It would be a curious picture of dream-life, could the fancies that thronged his brain be literally reproduced in print; but a faint idea may be gleaned of his airy bliss, when it is stated that twice that night, Hardy Zeph awoke from sound slumber to find himself closely embraced and rapturously kissed, while Dainty Lance was murmuring loving words in his unsympathetic ear!

After the second disturbance, Zeph arose in disgust, and rolling himself up in a blanket, lay down on the floor near the pyramid of fire, to resume his broken sleep.

When the young trappers awoke in the morning, they found Sibyl noiselessly engaged in preparing breakfast, to which they were soon doing ample justice.

In answer to a question put by Dainty Lance, the maiden replied that her father was still sleeping peacefully.

"When he awakens, it will be in his right mind once more," she said in a quiet tone that told how frequent these mad fits must have been, for her to treat them so calmly. "Then he will apologize to you for his actions last night. He was not accountable for what he did."

Dainty Lance hastened to assure her that he held no grudge against her father—nor did he. Love covered everything. The mad hermit might assault him every hour of the day, provided he might be favored by the smiles and soft tones of the daughter between jells.

Sibyl added that Hercules was also sleeping; that his wounds, though severe, were not really dangerous when his perfect health and magnificent constitution were taken into consideration. In a week, if no unfavorable symptoms showed themselves, he would be on his feet and nearly as good as ever.

Soon after breakfast, the young trappers, accompanied by Sibyl, made their way to the ice-chamber, removing the bell rope as they passed, and took a look at the outside world.

The storm was still raging; the snow falling thick and fast, though the fierce wind seemed dying out and growing less bitter-cold. So far as they could see, there were no signs of the enemy, and they believed the storm had driven them under shelter, even if they had not altogether abandoned the desperate game they had been playing so long.

After a while they returned to the fire chamber, where several hours were passed, very agreeably to both Sibyl and Dainty Lance, in conversation.

At the end of that time, the hermit made his appearance, dressed as when we last saw him, and at once began his apologies to Dainty Lance for the events of the past night.

The escape of Ham Toplong had been weighing heavily on his unsettled brain, and he had made his murderous attack under the belief that he was assailing the outlaw.

Dainty Lance freely granted his forgiveness, but Hardy Zeph was not so easily satisfied. His eyes were not blinded by love, and he felt that the hermit was telling a lie as he spoke. There was an uneasy, shifting look in his eyes that betrayed him, and the young trapper bluntly said:

"You want to take good keer that you don't make sech another mistake. Anybody that strikes my pard, strikes me; an' I give back lick fer lick, with a few throwed in fer good measure. So I say—say your prayers afore you git another sech a crazy notion in your noddle!"

There was no mistaking the meaning of the earnest speaker, and the face of the hermit flushed hotly, and he seemed on the point of making an angry reply to the insinuation thus conveyed, when a truly startling surprise took place, and gave them something more important to see to.

CHAPTER X.

A BOLD RASCAL'S DESPERATE GAME.

It was not the fault of Dirk Weeninx that the inmates of the subterranean refuge were given such a long respite. A bolder rascal than he might be searched for a long time in vain; bold even when the odds were against him. And as he was the last one to retreat, pausing to fire the shot that laid the giant negro low, so he was the first to pause and counsel a return to the assault, pouring bitter curses and fierce imprecations upon the heads of his associates when they sullenly refused to follow his lead back to the ice-rift.

"They ain't human critters—they're born devils!" doggedly uttered Ham Toplong, for probably the first time in his life holding an opinion different from that of his partner and master. "The nigger is bad enough, but the old man is a powerful sight wuss. He grabbed the boys, one in each hand, an' squeezed 'em to a jelly, ontel the blood run through his fingers like it war pourin' rain!"

This voracious statement proved the cap-sheaf, and wholesome as was their fear of Dirk Weeninx, the outlaws flatly refused to make any further movement until their force was all gathered together. Sullenly enough the leader yielded to what he could not control, and retreating to their den among the rocks, they bade defiance to the blustering storm and deathly cold while crowding around a roaring fire.

Early in the morning Dirk Weeninx was afoot, and leaving Ham Toplong, who had been given his orders, in command of the force, now numbering ten men, he sallied forth from the cave and strode away, on snow-shoes.

Dirk had made good use of his time, questioning Toplong closely, making him repeat everything he had either heard or seen while in the wonderful cavern, and he was now acting on a settled conviction that there must be more than one means of entering the hollow hill.

More than that, he believed he had seen that entrance, and even partially explored it, while searching for a half-way comfortable spot in which to lie in wait.

The traveling was exceedingly laborious, despite his wearing rackets, and a less persistent enemy than Dirk Weeninx would have bided a more favorable time, satisfied that his courted prey could not escape him while that terrible storm lasted.

"So much the better for me!" he muttered, bowing his head to the bitter blast, and pushing doggedly on. "They won't suspect danger during such nasty weather, and once I spy out the lay of the ground, I'll make my blow swift and sure! There are enough of the boys left to do the work up brown, if we can put in the first blow—and unless I am badly fooled about that windy hole, it can be done!"

Floundering through the snow, facing the fierce wind, pausing now and then to catch his breath, Dirk Weeninx doggedly pressed on, finally reaching the solitary spot which he now firmly believed was the key to the success he had so long coveted.

A narrow rift in the rocks was all that could be distinguished, and as he knelt beside it, Dirk Weeninx saw that the snow had drifted into the cheerless den, filling it almost entirely, from floor to ragged ceiling. But as he knelt there, he heard and felt the cold wind as it eddied into the rift, and his belief was still further confirmed.

Ever a close observer, the outlaw remembered enough of the internal arrangements of the rift to feel little hesitation in lowering himself into the snow-drift, which at once closed over his head.

With slight difficulty he groped his way along until he reached the further end of the cave, where it contracted like the mouth of a funnel, blocked up by a tolerably snug-fitting boulder.

Still covered by the snow, though he could feel a strong suction of air passing him, Dirk Weeninx secured a firm grasp upon the boulder, and exerting his powerful strength, rolled it aside.

The wind whistled by still stronger, carrying the snow with it, but the outlaw was not troubled much by this fact. Full a mile separated this hole from the ice-rift, and though he believed there was an open connection between the two, the distance was so considerable that he did not fear being betrayed by the increased draft.

Waiting until the drifting snow had partially subsided, he examined his pistols, making sure that they were in serviceable condition, that the cylinders were not clogged by the snow he had passed through, but would revolve freely. This done, he crept forward cautiously, silently.

Though feeling pretty confident that this passage would lead him direct to his coveted prey, Dirk Weeninx was resolved to leave nothing to chance, but to keep on until he was absolutely certain.

"There's time enough and to spare," he muttered. "I'll get an idea of the route, and the lay of the ground at the other end, then lead the boys in after nightfall. They can be bold enough when the chances are all on their side, and would rather try a surprise than lay out there in the snow for a day or two, watching the ice-rift, as they are now doing."

As he advanced, the caution of the outlaw was increased in due proportion, for he saw that his conjecture was well-founded, and that he was drawing near a portion of the strange, subterranean house, which was ordinarily inhabited.

A faint light grew clearer and more distinct, until he paused on the edge of a rock-chamber which was illumined by several gas-jets rising from the floor.

Furs and skins were scattered over the rock-floor, as a carpet, while choicer specimens were ranged along the walls in fanciful order, mingled with numerous weapons and garments, all of Indian manufacture, ornamented in the highest style of savage art and splendor.

The covetous eyes of the outlaw sparkled as he beheld these, for the furnishing of that one chamber, if conveyed to the right market, would produce a moderate competence. But he believed there were still more precious treasures beyond, and assuring himself that the chamber was untenanted, he passed through and resumed his explorations.

A few rods further on, he came to a side chamber, with a narrow entrance opening upon the passage, and as he paused here, he could distinctly hear the sounds of heavy, regular breathing. Cautiously creeping nearer, he peered in upon the negro giant whom he had until now believed dead. A bitter curse rose to his lips and was only smothered with difficulty. He felt a fierce longing to send a brace of bullets through the brain of the sleeping Colossus, but he knew that the report would bring the others upon him. He fingered his knife wistfully, but wounded though the giant was, he looked so formidable that Weeninx dare not make the bloody venture.

"It would take a saber blade to reach the heart of the monster, and unless slain instantly, he would crush me to jelly with his enormous strength. Better wait and make all sure," he muttered, turning reluctantly away.

In a very few moments he saw ample cause for congratulating himself on his prudent forbearance, for coming from no great distance ahead, he caught the sound of hurrahs in conversation.

For a brief space Dirk Weeninx hesitated, doubting whether to advance or beat a hasty retreat. Prudence told him the latter course was the one best to pursue. He had learned all that was essential to his plans. He had found the way into the secret house, and by retreating now, could guide his men at the proper time, earning his coveted prizes at a single, well-directed blow.

But curiosity urged him on a little further. It could do no harm to learn the exact force of the enemy.

So reasoning, and holding his bared knife in readiness for use, should the emergency arise, Dirk Weeninx crept forward, keeping in the deepest shadow, pausing only on the verge of the fire-chamber, where the mad hermit was then making his profuse apologies to Dainty Lance.

But Weeninx paid little attention to this speech. He saw that his discovery was almost inevitable. Sibyl was moving slowly toward his place of concealment, evidently meaning to leave the chamber. If so, she could not help observing him if he remained where he was. He knew, too, that he could not retreat in time to avoid being seen, and in his heart he bitterly cursed the mad curiosity that had run his throat into a noose.

Then came the sharp, significant speech of

Hardy Zeph, and as though fearing trouble would arise from it, Sibyl paused and turned half-way around.

In that instant the resolution of the bold outlaw was taken, and with a cat-like leap he landed close beside the maiden, one arm clasp her with fierce force, pinning both arms to her sides and holding her helpless, while his right hand held a bared knife with its keen point indenting her bosom, directly over her heart!

"Move a finger—touch a weapon, and I cleave her heart in twain!" he uttered, in a stern, yet subdued tone, fearful of arousing the sleeping giant if he spoke loudly.

The three men stood as if turned to stone. They saw that the daring ruffian held the maiden powerless in his grasp, and that not even instant death could hinder him from carrying out his diabolical threat if he were so minded. And that he meant exactly what he said, one look at his hard-set features and glowing eyes clearly proved.

"Remember what I said," added the bold rascal, in the same guarded tone. "At the first crooked move, the first word spoken above a whisper, the girl dies, even though you butcher me the next instant."

"Your terms—ask what you will—only spare her, my innocent child!" gasped the hermit, pale as death and trembling like a leaf with strong emotion.

"Defy him—make no terms—never mind me!" impulsively cried Sibyl, but then her words were cut short.

Dirk Weeninx contracted his left arm until Sibyl gasped and well-nigh fainted under the terrible compression, while the ruffian bore upon his knife until the white skin was punctured and a drop of blood stained its point.

"No parley—obey me, or she dies!" growled the ruffian, his eyes glowing venomously. "Turn your backs this way, one by one, as I indicate you, and drop your weapons on the floor at your feet. But mind. If a pistol explodes, it will sound the death-knell of this girl—I swear it by all above and below!"

They were utterly helpless, and could only obey him. To refuse would be death to Sibyl. And one by one they disarmed themselves, then awaited his further orders in silence.

Gripping his knife between his teeth, Dirk Weeninx tore the scarf from around Sibyl's neck, and thrusting a portion of it into her mouth, wrapped the ends tightly around her head and face. Then again holding the knife to her bosom, he said:

"One of you light that lantern, then lead the way to the spot where we fought you yesterday. Walk close together, holding each hand above your heads, save the one that carries the lantern. Lower them even for a moment, or attempt to run away, and I kill this girl."

Bitterly as they hated to, there was nothing for it but implicit obedience to the arbitrary commands of the bold ruffian who was playing such a desperate game. To revolt would sacrifice the innocent being whom two at least of the trio would gladly yield up their very lives to preserve.

In silence the hermit picked up and lighted the lantern at the fiery pyramid, then looked at Weeninx, who motioned him away, not for a moment relaxing his crushing grasp upon his long-coveted prize, or removing the knife-point from her bosom.

The hermit saw this, and in an agony of fear for his idolized child, he ventured to remonstrate:

"Remove your knife—think if you should stumble—it would be murder to the poor child! We promise not to give any trouble—to do exactly as you say, just so you do not injure her!"

"Not another word!" peremptorily muttered the rascal, who evidently enjoyed the situation. "Lead the way with the lantern. You boys follow him closely. Not a word unless I speak first!"

The hermit obeyed in silence, and the young trappers followed him. Close behind them came Dirk Weeninx, bearing Sibyl upon his left arm with as much apparent ease as though her weight was but that of an infant, no longer pressing the knife to her bosom, but holding it ready for immediate use. His brutal face was all aglow with evil passions, for he believed that success was certain. He knew that his men, under Ham Toplong, were lying in wait within close pistol-shot of the ice-rift, and he counted on driving the three disarmed men out to meet certain death.

Dainty Lance had said nothing thus far, but though silent, he was not entirely disheartened, and watched for some chance, to turn the tables on their foe, and rescue Sibyl.

But Dirk Weeninx was on his guard, and no such chance was offered until all hope seemed gone.

The natural bridge was passed, the hermit carefully lighting the precarious way, lest a misstep should hurl his idolized child down to a frightful death.

The ice-chamber was reached, and Dirk Weeninx exultantly ordered them to ascend the high steps. They could only obey, though Dainty Lance lagged behind the others, until sternly cautioned by the hardy rascal.

At that instant Sibyl, who had been counterfeiting unconsciousness, made a swift movement and wrested herself from the ruffian's grasp. With a furious curse, he made an ineffectual grasp at her, and at the same instant Dainty Lance made a mighty leap from the ice ledge, alighting with terrible force full upon the outlaw's back!

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAW OF THE BORDER.

THE moment that Sibyl, the Snow Sprite, wrested herself from his arms, Dirk Weeninx realized that he was going to have some trouble, after all, though

not anticipating the shape which it so quickly assumed. He uttered a loud, ringing yell which he knew would reach the ears of his ambushed men, and surely bring them down upon the backs of his unarmed foes, then he made an ineffectual grasp at the agile Snow Sprite.

Before he could do or say more, Dainty Lance was upon him, shooting down from the ice ledge nearly twenty feet above, his feet striking fairly against the outlaw's broad shoulders, crushing him forward and downward with a force that drove breath and senses entirely out of his carcass.

Unfortunately Dainty Lance did not fare much better. The shock was a terrific one. He fell together with Dirk Weeninx, and his head coming in violent contact with the icy floor, he lay like one dead, unconscious of the thrilling scenes which followed each other so rapidly.

Ham Toplong and his ambushed men had caught a glimpse of the head of the mad hermit as he reached the highest ice-step, and this being followed so closely by the signal of Dirk Weeninx for them to advance, they at once floundered through the deep snow, yelling fiercely.

The instant he noticed the action of Dainty Lance, Hardy plunged with break-neck recklessness down the icy flight, to lend his aid. It was unneeded, so far as Dirk Weeninx was concerned, but the dashing trapper lay so like death himself, that Hardy Zeph had eyes, thoughts for nothing else, until satisfied that his mate was only stunned.

By this time, clearly believing that their redoubtable chief had cleared the way for them, the mountain vultures were leaping down into the ice-rift, led by Ham Toplong.

That worthy was immediately seized by the hermit, whose courage was no longer paralyzed by the knowledge of his daughter's danger, and tumbled headlong down the ledge to the floor of the ice-chamber, but losing his own balance, and keeping from falling only by clinging to the raw-hide rope at the side.

Deceived by the gloom, the outlaws believed that Ham Toplong had made the descent of his own accord, and with loud yells they followed.

Hardy Zeph saw them coming, and snatching the revolvers from the belt of Dirk Weeninx, he at once opened fire on the enemy, who were thrown into confusion by the wholly unexpected attack where they fancied all was clear.

Standing over the prostrate form of his insensible comrade, Hardy Zeph worked his weapons rapidly, a veritable hero, fighting ten to one. And two of the ten went down in death, while as many more felt biting wounds, before they saw by the red glare of his shots how small was the force opposing them.

This, with the scent of freshly flowing blood in their nostrils was sufficient to change their panic into rage, and with fierce yells, blasphemous cries, they rushed bodily upon the dauntless young trapper.

Not an inch did Hardy Zeph quail. He was fighting for more than his own life now—for that of his heart-brother. No harm could come to Dainty Lance while he lived.

Sibyl tore the muffling scarf from her face, just in time to behold the recklessly daring leap of her lover, and in that moment, if never before, she acknowledged her heart's master.

She saw the hermit hurl Toplong down the icy steps, saw Hardy Zeph arm himself with the weapons of the fallen chief, and taking pattern by his example, she rushed to where Toplong lay, snatching the revolvers from his belt and firing upon the mountain outlaws as they plunged past her.

The hermit, also, was only momentarily discomfited, and recovering himself, he leaped after the enemy, his brain beginning to throb and burn with the old madness that rendered him a fiend incarnate while it lasted.

Thus furiously assaulted both in front and rear, where they had counted on no resistance at all, the outlaws were thrown into utter confusion. And the cap-sheaf was put on when a horrible roar filled the vaulted chamber—a roar that past experience told them meant utter destruction.

In a panic of horror, the survivors turned to flee, but their path was barred by Sibyl with Toplong's pistols, and the mad hermit, who was wielding a huge icicle scarcely less terrible than the club of the negro giant.

Fate was against them. They were in a trap from which there was no escape. Before they could force their way past the mad hermit, Hercules was upon them, his monstrous club dealing death at every blow.

One whirlwind like rush—then all was over. The mad hermit glared around him in quest of another enemy. His blazing eyes rested upon the white, upturned face of Dainty Lance, and he crouched as for a leap, the blood-stained icicle trembling in his grasp, a merciless devil glittering in his bloodshot eyes.

But faithful Zeph Hardy was watching him, and he knelt over the body of his heart brother, his revolver leveled, in readiness to send its last charge crashing through the madman's brain, ere harm should come to his chum.

Sibyl, too, saw the intention of her father, and leaping forward she clasped her arms round his neck, charming away the ugly demon as she alone knew how.

His work done, Hercules sat down, faint and trembling in every limb, feeling the effects of his past injuries.

And thus Dainty Lance found them, as his eyes opened, and he arose to his feet, still confused and dizzy, but not much the worse for his flying leap and subsequent shock.

His first thought after assuring himself that neither Sibyl or Hardy Zeph had sustained any in-

jury of moment, was given to Dirk Weeninx, whom he found alive, though still senseless.

Sibyl quickly managed to calm her father, and the hermit began examining the fallen vultures. Of them all, only one besides Weeninx gave any evidence of life, and that was the grizzled outlaw, Ham Toplong.

"Hold!" cried Dainty Lance, as the hermit ruthlessly raised his ice-weapon, with the intention of forever stilling the faint struggles of the fellow, who was just recovering from his fall. "Hold!" I claim his life, together with that of Dirk Weeninx, by the universal law of the border!"

The hermit turned sharply upon the bold speaker, but he saw something in those glittering blue eyes that quelled his anger, and he lowered his weapon, with a short laugh.

"Have your will; I see that they will never give us any more trouble, and that is all I care for."

Tearing the raw-hide rope loose, Dainty Lance cut it up into suitable lengths and bound the hands of the two outlaws behind them, leaving their feet free.

While thus engaged, the hermit and Hercules were disposing of the dead men in a summary manner, dragging them to the chasm and hurling them down into the subterranean river.

By the time this repulsive task was completed, both Dirk Weeninx and Ham Toplong had recovered their senses, and were ruefully eying one another, too dejected by their wholly unexpected reverses to utter a word.

Dainty Lance stood before them, speaking coldly: "You came to us in want and misery, asking help."

"We added you; fed, clothed and provided you with means to reach the settlements. But in return, you waylaid us and sought to take our lives. Failing in this, you burned down the building where you had found shelter, robbed us of our property, and then hunted us almost to death's door. By the aid of these good friends, you were foiled then, only to make another attempt. You stole upon us unawares, bound us, and left us to what you believed would be certain death. And since then, you have never ceased in your bitter attempts at murder. That you have been as often foiled, does not lessen your crimes."

"Men say that there is no law on the border; but they are wrong. Here it is eye for eye and tooth for tooth. As a man does unto his fellow men, just so shall they do unto him. Do you understand me?"

"Bah!" growled Dirk Weeninx, his eyes filled with a greenish, venomous light. "Why waste so much breath? You mean to murder us. Do it like a man, not torture us beforehand by railing at us with a woman's tongue."

Dainty Lance made no reply to this insolent speech, but turned first to the hermit, then Hercules, and finally to Hardy Zeph, asking each in turn what such crimes as he had enumerated deserved by way of punishment.

The answer of each was short and to the point: death!

He passed Sibyl by in silence, and in silence she thanked him for this thoughtfulness. In justice she could not plead in favor of clemency, and it would be hard to pronounce the death sentence in cold blood. And as he met her grateful glance, Dainty Lance felt warmed to the very core of his heart.

Toplong began an appeal for mercy when he saw how sternly in earnest his judges were, but Weeninx cut him short by a heavy kick from one of his unconfined limbs.

"Stiffen your backbone, and don't disgrace your training, old man," he cried, with a reckless laugh, but even he grew serious, and his bronzed face turned a sickly white as Dainty Lance pronounced their doom.

"The punishment that you devised for us two, shall be yours. Bound back to back, you shall be exposed to the storm, to live or die as the fates ordain."

Hardy Zeph broke forth into a hearty chuckle as this sentence was pronounced. It seemed especially appropriate, and remembering what untold agony he had suffered, he felt that he could not have devised a more exquisite revenge.

Snatching up the lantern he ran back to the fire-chamber, returning with the weapons Dirk Weeninx had obliged them to discard, together with a bundle wrapped up in a blanket.

As it was not intended to go far from the ice-rift, and as the freshly-fallen snow was so deep as to render snow-shoe navigation difficult, the party did not trouble to don rackets, but forcing their prisoners along before them, emerged from the ice-rift and plowed their way up the hill to the high point from whence Ham Toplong first discovered the Snow Sprite and her herculean body-guard.

The giant strength of Hercules sufficed to hold the doomed outlaws back to back, while Dainty Lance bound them firmly.

Hardy Zeph was in his element, and insisted on carrying out every little detail that had marked their own treatment when the present captives had the upper hand.

He manufactured huge gags, and Hercules, grinning, choked the doomed wretches until their jaws were sufficiently distended for the purpose. The gags were applied, and then Zeph unrolled his bundle, revealing a chunk of fresh meat. Across this he placed rifles and pistols, knives and belts saying:

"That's grub when you git hungry, an' weapons to fend yourselves. Ef you git tired an' cold, lay down. One kin be bed, t'other play blanket. Take it turn about, an' mebbe you kin keep from freezing to death as long as we did."

And thus the two evil men were left to their fate,

the avengers passing down the hill and entering the cavern once more.

And the rising wind howled more fiercely, the snow flakes fell faster and faster, as though eager to bury its victims forever!

CHAPTER XII.

A BETROTHAL AND SOMETHING ELSE.

For three days and three nights, that terrible storm raged without a moment's cessation. Then, at the end of that period, it broke up as abruptly as it had commenced, the sun coming out clear and cheering, though the weather was steady at several degrees below freezing point.

During those three days, not one of the little party below ground ventured outside of their romantic refuge. And, despite the howling of the storm-furies outside, or the biting cold which penetrated even to the fire-chamber, Dainty Lance never spent more blissful hours than were comprised in those three days.

He drank deep of the intoxicating cup of love, and long ere those three days were spent, the Snow Sprite's maidenly reserve was overcome, and she, too, drank deep draughts of pure and undefiled love. For such it was, on both sides. It is only among the young that first love may be found in all its virginal purity. If this love is real and sincere, it is wholly unmingled with alloy. They are ignorant of any higher happiness than simply being in the company of the idolized one. Other older hearts may love as passionately, but there is ever a trace of sensuality in the emotion; always a looking ahead to prospective bliss, of which younger enthusiasts—always providing their love is genuine and all-absorbing—are innocent of.

Thus it was with Sibyl and Dainty Lance. Thrown closely together at all hours of the day and night, loving each other with the first passion of virgin hearts, knowing that they were beloved even as they loved, yet they remained pure and unsullied even in thought, content in the mere fact of their being together. As yet not a word had been spoken of their love between them. There seemed no need. They understood each other so thoroughly.

But there were two less contented inmates of the cavern.

The hermit, though he wore a mask of bland approval whenever in the immediate society of the lovers, at times suffered that mask to drop, and reveal his real sentiments.

"The devil is in him bigger'n a woodchuck!" muttered Zeph Hardy, the first time he surprised this venomous, threatening look in the old man's eye, and knowing that Dainty Lance would treat a warning jestingly, he set himself to watching the watcher, spying on the spy, his hand ever ready to defend his heart-brother in case of need.

So the days passed on. The storm came to an end, and the two young trappers ventured forth to see if aught could be discovered of the mountain vultures whom they had repaid in their own coin.

The snow was of extraordinary depth, but as a crust was gradually forming, and they wore rackets, they contrived to reach the hill on which the outlaws had been bound, to meet the terrible death they had devised for others.

With long sticks the youngsters probed the snow. "I have found them!" muttered Dainty Lance, ceasing his explorations. "The bodies can lie here safe enough until the snow melts away; then we will bury them out of sight."

"The wolves and buzzards kin do that well enough," growled Hardy Zeph. "They wouldn't a give us no better."

Back again to the underground home, where day after day stole by, full of blissful happiness to some; of deep anxiety to others.

Thus a week was spent, when there came a great change.

As usual, Dainty Lance and Sibyl were together. They drifted from one subject to another, until they began speaking of the future.

Then Sibyl grew gloomy and tearful. She foresaw that the time was coming when this precious communion must end in separation, and when anxiously questioned by Dainty Lance as to the cause of her sudden despondency, she made frank confession.

The Spring would soon arrive, and then the young trappers would naturally tire of such inactive life. They had regained the furs and peltries of which the mountain vultures had robbed them. With these they would return to the settlements.

Thus far Dainty Lance listened to her in amazement. Though not a single word of love, as such, had passed between them, he believed it was all understood. But now he made ample amends.

Such speeches read tamely enough on paper. They are eloquent enough to ears that drink in the soft cadences, but only provoke a smile from those who read, even though they may "have been there" themselves.

Enough that Dainty Lance left no room for doubt or misunderstanding. He declared his love, and in so many words asked Sibyl to bless him by becoming his wife.

Dainty Lance awaited her reply in fear and trembling. Like all true lovers, he doubted his own worth, and expected disappointment where any one less blind would have seen his success was a foregone conclusion.

Soft and low was the answer he received, but it sufficed for him, and then, for the first time during all their close intercourse, his arms were wrapped around the yielding form and drew it to his breast; heart to heart, lip to lip—bliss far beyond expression in words.

And then they talked of their future life, when they should be all in all to each other; all uncon-

scious that an evil pair of eyes were glaring upon them from the shadow beyond—that the hand of an enemy was grasping a revolver that was aimed at the heart of the happy young trapper, with fingers that itched to press the trigger.

As though this evil eye had power to overshadow her supreme bliss, Sibyl gradually grew nervous, and her old forebodings returned with redoubled force.

First Dainty Lance joyously rallied her, then gently chided her growing despondency, until he learned the cause of her trouble.

"Remember the strange antipathy with which my father has regarded you from the very first. Remember, he is not wholly as other men. His brain is diseased, but he never forgets a prejudice once conceived. He may not listen to your suit with favor."

"With such a glorious prize at stake, darling, I could talk life into a stone, or restore a dead man to life. He may have fallen into the same mistake as you—may think that I have been making love only as a means of passing away the time, to fly away at the coming of Spring; but I can easily convince him of his mistake.

"This very evening I will ask his consent to our marriage. He will grant it—he must grant it, for we would die if disappointed now—and then, when the Spring melts away the deep snows, we will turn our face toward the settlements, there to find some holy man who will bind us together in the law of God and man—but not more truly, surely, than we are now united in heart."

The weapon was lowered, the eavesdropper stole silently away, a smile upon his deathlike face, a satisfied light in his eyes. And when the lovers next met the hermit, he beamed benevolently upon them, the very ideal of a kind, complaisant parent.

Dainty Lance was eager to broach the all-important subject, but Sibyl had extorted a promise that he would wait until after the evening meal was over, and he was as good as his word.

Sibyl, blushing charmingly at his roguish smile, beat a hasty retreat, leaving the three men, with Hercules, who was now nearly recovered from his injuries, together in the fire-chamber.

Encouraged by the bland and unusually good-humored expression which rested on the face of the hermit, Dainty Lance frankly unbosomed himself, avowing his love, modestly stating that it was fully reciprocated, and begging the father to sanction their speedy union.

The hermit was either mightily pleased, or else was a most consummate actor. He warmly embraced the youth, and with tears in his eyes, declared that his heart had nothing left to wish for.

"I freely own that I have doubted you. I believed you were simply amusing yourself, by playing on the heart-strings of Sibyl; and I have watched you closely, resolved to drain your heart to its last drop at the first sign of positive treachery. But I believe you now. And I say again, that I have nothing left to wish for. You love each other, you are admirably suited to make each other happy. And when I die—which may happen at any moment, so terribly shattered is my brain—I will leave my darling in good, true, loving hands!"

He ceased, his voice choking with sobs that he could not entirely suppress. And even Hardy Zeph, his suspicions banished to the four winds, felt the moisture in his eyes, and beheld surrounding objects as through a hazy atmosphere.

The hermit declared that he must visit his daughter, and bestow upon her his blessing. Dainty Lance begged permission to bear him company, but it was smilingly refused.

"Your turn shall come, never fear; you shall not be denied your love's rights; but just now I wish to see her alone. Wait for me here, I will soon return."

While he was gone, Hercules following at a gesture, Hardy Zeph cordially congratulated his partner. Sibyl had exerted herself to remove his prejudices, and successfully; so much so, that the rough trapper was ready to die in her defense.

The hermit soon returned, and with him came Sibyl, blushing divinely, more gloriously lovely than ever.

Dainty Lance enfolded her in his arms, proudly, lovingly, and in a voice shaken by strong emotion, the hermit blessed them over and over.

Then, with a gayety that seemed forced and unnatural, he bade them all follow him; that the joyous occasion should be as fitly celebrated as his poor means would permit.

Laughing and talking excitedly, he led the way from the fire-chamber to the room whose hangings of fur, and valuable ornaments and Indian weapons had so strongly excited the cupidity of Dirk Weeninx, where they found Hercules grinning like some enormous satyr, behind an improvised table on which stood several bottles, a package of sugar, and a tin can with water boiling above one of the lighted gas jets.

Dainty Lance felt that a quiet interview with Sibyl, out of earshot of the others, would be far preferable to this intended jollification, but his heart was too full just then to raise any objection, and he ranged with the rest around the table.

At a motion from the hermit, Hercules brought the hot water, and he mixed the strong-scented compound, passing each one his cup, giving Sibyl one of pure water instead of whisky.

In a quick, nervous tone, he bade them all drink to the health of the blushing bride elect.

Had it been aqua-fortis, neither Dainty Lance nor Hardy Zeph would have refused to honor this toast, and with eager haste they swallowed the steaming compound. And as they did so, both felt as though a sharp, benumbing blow had struck the nape of

their necks—the cups dropped from their hands and they stood like men suddenly turned to stone.

The hermit dashed aside his untasted cup, and at a sign, Hercules grasped Sibyl and bore her shrieking away.

Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph saw this, and strove to spring to the rescue; but in vain. Their brain was as active as ever, but it was as though the limbs, body, muscles had all been suddenly petrified. They could not move even the tip of a finger, nor an eyelid. They were living, thinking, sentient beings, yet as much dead as though they had been buried ten fathoms deep in the earth for as many thousand years!

Casting aside all disguise, the mad hermit stood before them as he really was, a malignant devil—a fiend incarnate, rejoicing in the terrible deed his cunning had wrought.

"Poor, silly fools!" he said, and every word rung distinctly through their brains, even while they were unable to move a muscle. "Did you think I would allow you to bring my neck to the hangman's noose? You flattered yourselves that I was blind to your accursed cunning—that I could not detect or even suspect the treacherous purpose which you concealed beneath a pretended love for one whom you well knew you could never wed—my darling! If only for this insult to her, you should die, ten thousand deaths in one!"

"I would have slain you before matters went so far," he added, addressing Dainty Lance more particularly, "but your mate was too cunning, and watched me too close. But I bided my time, and the blow has fallen at last."

"You are doomed to death. Even if found by friends who would sacrifice their own lives to preserve yours, they could not aid you. Outwardly you are insensible to pain. Your limbs and body are like stone. Blood would not flow, even though your limbs were to be amputated, one after another. But for all that, you can and will suffer. You will feel the gnawing pangs of starvation, growing keener and more horrible with each passing hour, until each moment will be more agonizing than death: yet you will live a week, two weeks, and perchance even longer. Oh! it will be an exquisite revenge for your intended treachery!"

He paused with a diabolical laugh, a madman now if never before.

He raised Dainty Lance in his arms, and planted him in an upright position again, at the side of the table opposite that where Hardy Zeph stood, rigid as a statue cunningly carved out of stone.

Repeating his devilish laugh, he brought food and drink, and placed them on the board between them. "See!" he said, chuckling in horrible glee. "I am generous. When you begin to experience the pangs of starvation, you can feast your eyes upon these viands."

Furiously the strangely doomed trappers sought to banish the dread spell that fettered their limbs, but in vain.

As the hermit said, they were already dead—dead even while their brains lived—and their horrible torture was already begun!

Laughing diabolically, the hermit left the chamber.

How long a time elapsed, they had no means of computing, but it appeared an eternity; then they heard the sounds of footsteps, and the hermit returned, accompanied by Hercules, in whose arms rested Sibyl, strangely white and deathlike, all but her eyes.

They were filled with unutterable despair, which deepened into agony, as the negro, in obedience to a gesture by the mad hermit, held her face close before that of Dainty Lance. She did not speak. Not a muscle moved, only the terrible despair in her eyes told that she was not dead!

"Closer—closer still!" cried the madman. "One last kiss—there can be no harm in that—are they not betrothed?"

Nearer until their ice-cold lips touched; then the negro drew back, and strode away with his burden.

One parting laugh—a final jeer, then the mad hermit followed leaving his two victims to their horrible doom!

CHAPTER XIII.

DAINTY LANCE TAKES AN OATH.

DAY after day rolled on, and still the two trappers stood confronting each other in that strange, petrified manner.

As the mad hermit predicted, they felt the growing pangs of hunger—hunger that steadily deepened into the gnawing torture of starvation, doubly intensified by the scent and sight of the food and drink meticulously placed before them.

Just how long they remained thus, neither of the victims could ever tell, or even guess; but it must have been all of a week before Dainty Lance felt his knees suddenly give way beneath him, suffering him to fall in a heap to the floor like a dead man.

Hardy Zeph believed his mate was dead—and the bitter agony it caused him enabled him to shatter the weakening bonds of the baleful drug. A gurgling, gasping cry parted his lips, and he supported himself against the table, trembling in every limb like one just arisen from a bed of long and severe sickness. With a powerful effort of will, he managed to raise both water and food to his lips, and force them down his parched throat. Then he, too, sunk down in a deathlike stupor.

Thanks to the nourishment he had taken, he was soon enabled to arise and assist Dainty Lance, restoring him sufficiently to swallow a few mouthfuls of food and drink. Then, side by side they lay down and fell asleep, a deep unconsciousness that lasted for many hours.

It was nearly a week before they were able to handle their persons with any degree of ease, and twice as long before they felt entirely restored.

Whether the mad hermit was deceived in the strength of the drug he administered, or really had no intention of enchaining their limbs until death by starvation should come to their relief, but addressed them as he did merely to add to the torture they must suffer, can only be surmised. It may have been that he only desired to gain sufficient time in which to make his escape; for that he had fled in company with Hercules, taking Sibyl with him, was made manifest by the young trappers crawling upon their hands and knees through the entire cavern, before they regained strength sufficient to walk.

The hollow hill was deserted by all human beings save themselves, but while making this exploration, Dainty Lance came upon a scrap of paper which he had studied over and over again, though the written contents were indelibly imprinted upon both his brain and his heart.

It had neither address nor signature, and broke off abruptly in the middle of a sentence. He found the paper in the chamber usually occupied by the Snow Sprite, and felt no doubt but that she had traced those hurried lines:

"I have just learned what was the meaning of that terrible scene—doomed to death, but perhaps you may yet escape. We are to leave this—I believe to go Northward—to the home of the Plain Cree. If you live, seek out the village of a chief called—"

Here the writing ended. The paper was crumpled up and thrown in a corner, as though at the sudden entrance of some one whom the writer feared.

When Dainty Lance read these words, doubting not that they had been traced by the agitated hand of his loved one, he sunk upon his knees and with uplifted hands, swore a solemn oath that he would know no rest until he had found his lost love, or perished in the attempt!

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